



Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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Hunter Bird Observers Club 2013 Annual Report

Introduction

The 2013 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 12th February 2014. It is available via the club website at www.hboc.org.au. This Annual Report consists of an overview of 2013 in the main body of the report along with detailed reports (from the various 'section' co-ordinators) attached as appendices.

1. Management & Administration

This section of HBOC includes management and administrative areas that facilitate all aspects of Club operations through its committee structure and other appointed positions.

The Annual Financial Report for 2013, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

HBOC was again represented by a hard-working and dedicated committee that met monthly, along with other interested members that also attended and took part in discussions on management matters between meetings. There are such a range of issues and responsibilities that the committee handles that it is easy to underestimate the workload that the committee (and supporting roles) deals with. The committee members and other passionate members that contributed are thanked for their support and input throughout the year.

As with the previous year, the issue of affiliation was high on the committee's agenda during 2013. A model for affiliation with BirdLife Australia (BLA) was drafted and eventually formalised via a cooperation agreement. Although several members played a part in cementing this relationship, Mike Newman is to be recognised for playing a key role in clarifying HBOC's position with BLA on the issue of affiliation and was instrumental in shaping the final agreement which is being finalised for signing as I write.

The Club continues to maintain and enhance good working relationships with many private and public organisations. The promotion and undertaking of collaborative efforts is an important aspect of the role of Club management and that of the membership in general. The benefits of these collaborations are not just evident as financial support but rather as better communication, exchange of information and understanding resulting in improved conservation of our birds which are under increasing environmental pressure. HBOC acknowledges the contributions of collaborative organisations and those members who have been involved in this regard.

The Club has a deserved upstanding and highly respected position as one of the peak environmental organisations in the Hunter. The members are to be congratulated for consolidating this reputation and the vast amount of volunteer effort that goes into helping the Club function is also worthy of recognition.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge 2 people that are standing down from the club's management team. Firstly, Paul Baird is stepping back after 9 years on the executive, including 3 years as president (2009-2011 inclusive) in the middle of that stint. I would also like to recognise the diligent work undertaken over the past 4 years by our out-going Treasurer, Joy Nicholls. Being Treasurer is never an easy task and it comes with it a very large responsibility. Joy was very pro-active as Treasurer, making well-informed decisions about how best to manage the Club's funds and setting up electronic means for transactions to occur. Joy also handled many membership

matters and was of great assistance to the Membership Secretary. Along the way, she also regularly collected the mail from the PO Box, sorted it and then distributed it. *Thank you to you both.*

2. Membership

Administrative, personnel matters and services related to the membership.

Membership Secretary: The Membership Secretary (Rob Kyte) has introduced a number of initiatives to diversify the membership. Working closely with the Treasurer, Rob has produced a comprehensive, regularly updated data base of the membership which facilitates reliable communication with members.

Club Membership: At 31 January 2013 there were 177 financial members. At year end 31 December 2013 there were 303 financial members, a club record. There were 49 new members in 2013 (22 single, 13 family and 1 junior) and 23 members from 2012 did not re-join in 2013. Adjustments to the year-end total were made due to changes in membership type and members leaving the club. *Big thanks to Rob for his valuable assistance in reaching the milestone of 300 club members.*

All membership incentives introduced in 2012 are still in place, apart from the discount on entry to the Hunter Wetlands Centre.

Hunter 300 & 350 Club: A fun component of the Club where those keen birders who have seen more than 300 species in the Hunter Region publish their tallies on the website (though only following peer review for those with more than 350 species on their list). Badges are available for those reaching the 300 and 350 species milestones and in 2013 we had the very exciting occasion of presenting the Club's first "400 badge" to Ann Lindsey. After a lot of list-reviewing (and soul-searching) to bring her Hunter list into order, Ann had seen 399 species in the Hunter when news of the Pacific Gull at Nobby's on the 2nd June filtered in. After one unsuccessful attempt in the middle of the day, Ann returned in the late afternoon to find the bird on Nobby's Beach. Congratulations Ann (who has now pulled away from 400, having added at least 2 species in the interim).

Library: The extensive library continues to be well used by members each Club Night. Additions to the library in 2013 included "Birds of South America: Passerines" and the "Birds of India". A list of all books in the library is currently being produced and will be posted on the inside of the cupboard door where the books are housed.

Digital Photo Library: The digital library remains at 2540 slides covering 386 different species of birds, with no new additions made in 2013. The potential for some images to be made available online has been suggested and may be explored in the future.

E-mail Service: The e-mail service continued to play a much needed role in Club communications. This efficient means of distributing special messages and other interesting information keeps members informed, especially between Newsletters. It also provides an important link to those who receive their Newsletter electronically.

'Hunterbirding': This online forum for sharing (predominantly local) bird information, reporting sightings and for general discussion saw 59 new members join the list in 2013 (nearly double the amount that joined in 2012). This brings the total number of subscribers to 189 (although some addresses are apparently bouncing so there are effectively 162 active members). Members are encouraged to join the forum, either with a view to read posts or to contribute to discussions. Contributors to identification threads are encouraged to explain why they arrived at an identification, to add to the educational benefit of the chat group resource.

The Club recognises the efforts of the Hunterbirding moderator (Dan Williams) and also thanks all contributors that make Hunterbirding happen.

3. Activities

Includes planning, organisation and participation in the leisure-based bird watching and social activities of the Club.

Outings: HBOC implemented a successful program of outings including the monthly Sunday and midweek outings, camps and annual Twitchathon, primarily focussing on the recreational needs of members.

Monthly Sunday outings covered a range of locations and habitats with attendances varying, often in association with either other activities happening at the time or, more likely, the weather.

Mid-week outings continued to be very popular with the biggest attendance being 27 who turned out to the Christmas outing to Stockton Sandspit and continued on to lunch at a local pub, while 27 people enjoyed the September camp at Gloucester.

Long week-end camps: The Australia Day Camp to Moonan Flat was only attended by two lucky campers. The June Long Weekend camp was at Towarri NP near Scone. The Easter camp at Macquarie Marshes was well attended with an extensive bird list from an extensive area encompassing a range of habitats. The October camp at Durrigere State Conservation Area proved to be very popular, not just with birders, but with the great number and variety of birds seen.

The *BASNA Annual Twitchathon* fundraising birdwatching event is always popular with HBOC members and 6 teams connected with HBOC took part in the various race categories in 2013. Again, the winning team from the Main Race went to a HBOC team (Hunter Home Brewers) whilst the Dry-throated Buzzards team stayed true to their cycling-only format in the Hunter and tallying their “goal” of 180 species at last. Approximately \$4500 was raised by HBOC-related teams and the NSW & ACT total was approximately \$25,000. Funds raised in 2013 will go to BirdLife's Sydney Powerful Owl Project.

In addition to the leisure and social benefits enjoyed by everyone, these outings are also a not-to-be-underestimated source of observational data for the Hunter Region. All records from HBOC activities are routinely submitted to the BirdLife Australia Atlas plus highlights are reported at Club night meetings or via the Hunterbirding email chat group and used for the Annual Bird Report. Members are encouraged to do likewise with their individual sightings.

To the many members, including the 2013 Club Activities Officer (Lorna Mee), those organising, coordinating and leading outings and to all those attending; thank you for your involvement. The generosity of the landholders of private properties is also acknowledged.

4. Club Night

The monthly Club Night is one of the feature activities of HBOC.

Club Night meetings were held at the Hunter Wetlands Centre every month in 2013 except January, with an average attendance of 51.6 members per meeting (Feb AGM and Club Meeting = 53; Mar = 76; Apr = 56; May = 50; Jul = 50; Sep= 48; Oct = 50; Nov = 57; Dec = 76 [Jun/Aug not recorded])

The Guest Speaker Program included local and national subjects covering conservation issues, research findings, travel and general interest. In formulating the speaker program the committee seeks to establish a balance of topics and a range of speakers. Thank you to all presenters for their time, expertise and effort in preparing and presenting these informative talks.

Bird of the Evening is a short, 5-10 minute piece that usually precedes the main speaker at Club nights. Members are encouraged to present a Bird of the Evening segment in any format (be it pictures, poetry, powerpoint or prose).

The “Observations” part of meetings is a good opportunity for people to share their local sightings and contribute to the knowledge-base of our birds.

Towards the end of the year a new ‘segment’ was trialled where distribution maps based on BirdLife Australia Atlas data in the Region were shown, with the audience asked to guess the species. These segments have proved popular and have generated much discussion about the intricacies of atlassing as well as bird distribution in the Region.

The December *Christmas Meeting* was once again packed to the rafters by a good number of members who enjoyed a diverse array of speakers as well as Twitchathon presentations. As always, this was followed by an amazing spread of food and drinks (the likes of which in 2013 I think would be unprecedented).

Many thanks to all of the people that chip in to ensure that Club Nights happen smoothly – it is a great team effort every month.

5. Newsletter

HBOC’s regular newsletter communicates Club news, the events calendar, interesting sightings, Club outing and other reports and birding articles of general interest, to members, selected birding organisations and the public, either directly or via the HBOC web site.

The Newsletter continues its history as a quality publication and vital means of communication as it links members within the Club through its news reports, and other birding articles. There is always a good supply of articles and photographs submitted to the editor ensuring a high quality and sizeable Newsletter. The many members who contribute articles and photographs to the Newsletter are thanked for their interest, time and effort. The Club is indeed indebted to the dedicated editor (Liz Crawford) and the printing and distribution team (Robert and Margaret Stewart) for delivering such a high quality service to the Club.

6. Special Interest Group

At present, this section offers the opportunity for members with a special interest in bird photography to develop their bird watching and photographic knowledge / skills while promoting birds and the environment.

A ‘Phototwitch’ took place on the 10th March, with the winner (Michael Kearns) snapping 106 species within the 8 hour period. The possibility of another event in 2014 is being considered.

7. Conservation

This section is primarily concerned with issues relevant to the protection of birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region and beyond. It helps link the areas of HBOC endeavour and the community through its collaborative partnerships, networking and advocacy.

With over 70 species of birds in the Region now listed as threatened (Black Falcon was added to the NSW list during 2013 and Australian Painted Snipe was added to the Commonwealth list) and many habitats providing habitat for a diversity of bird species under threat, the conservation arm of the Club is vitally important. These efforts were spear-headed by Ann Lindsey, who has reiterated that she would like to relinquish the position after many years of service. For the Club to be able to be involved at the forefront on conservation matters in the Region depends on the dedication of members and the bank of quality supporting background information that is forthcoming through other sections of the Club (especially Field Studies and Data Management). As Ann writes in the Conservation Report:

“It is imperative that HBOC’s conservation work continues and in order for this to happen a new conservation officer is urgently needed. HBOC has a very good name in both industrial and government circles and avifauna welfare is now on most agendas. It has been a hard slog to reach this point and if HBOC wants to keep bird conservation in the forefront we need to keep up the momentum. We all like to go birdwatching but if we want to see birds, then we need to make every effort to preserve their habitat. One of the main jobs of the conservation officer is to keep track of correspondence. As you will see below, other members are prepared to write submissions and letters. Conservation effort is the responsibility of every member of the Club.”

This will be a focus for the Club in 2014 as conservation is considered to be at the heart of the Club’s aims.

Following on from 2012, HBOC maintained its position on the proposed “T4” fourth coal loader project on Kooragang / Ash Island by Port Waratah Coal Services (PWCS). In March 2013 many members of HBOC attended the protest rally against T4, proudly carrying the club’s banner. PWCS made a new application during the year with a “Preferred Project Report”, in which no changes were made to the impacts on Swan Pond. HBOC made a submission against the project in November 2013.

Other submissions were made or letters were written about the Hexham Relief Roads Project, Capital Strategic Dredging Project – South Arm of the Hunter River, Rail Flyover Modification by Newcastle Coal and Infrastructure Group and Newcastle Wetlands Reserve and Market Swamp.

In terms of having input into policy and campaigns, HBOC provided:

- Submission into the *Inquiry into the Effectiveness of Threatened Species and Ecological Communities’ Protection in Australia by the Australian Government – Senate – Standing Committee on Environment and Communications*. HBOC is mentioned several times in the published report produced in August 2013.
- Submission on the New Planning Laws for NSW (White Paper).
- Submission against the weakening of Australia’s environmental laws.
- Submission on the Management of Public Lands in NSW.
- Direct support for the “No Shooting in National Parks” campaign including submissions.
- Input into the Draft Plan of Management for Worimi Conservation Lands

On a brighter note, habitat rehabilitation was undertaken / continued in 2013 at Kooragang Dykes, Ash Island, Stockton Sandspit, Tomago Wetlands and Green Wattle Creek.

The attached Conservation Report (Appendix A) provides a detailed summary of the various conservation matters that HBOC was directly involved with in 2013 as well as the members that contributed to them.

8. Field Studies, Data Management and Records Appraisal

This section of HBOC addresses collection of data, monitoring of bird populations and maintenance / appraisal of records which underpin the HBOC research and conservation effort while at the same time making a worthwhile contribution to members’ leisure-based bird watching.

Field studies and data management are inherently linked - no field studies program has any significant value unless the data from it are appropriately managed (including storage, analysis, and dissemination of results). Records appraisal is undertaken by a Records Appraisal Committee that oversees the assessment of rare and unusual reports of birds in the Region.

This part of HBOC is particularly strong and underpins many of the conservation efforts and published work in *The Whistler* and the Annual Bird Report.

Field Studies

A feature of HBOC’s Field Studies program is the high degree of collaboration with other conservation minded organisations – such as the Kooragang Wetlands Rehabilitation Project, The Hunter Wetlands Centre Australia, Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) offices in Newcastle, Nelson Bay and Gloucester, Department of Primary Industries (Crown Lands) and BirdLife Australia. Individual Club members often receive similar strong support from relevant organisations when conducting their regular surveys.

IBA monitoring was a significant component of HBOC’s Field Studies program in 2013, and will continue to be so in future years. However, resource constraints mean that the monitoring efforts have to be prioritised; it is a fact of life that there is only a small core group within the Club that are willing or able to dedicate any time to conducting surveys.

Several other field studies are also co-ordinated by the Club, including multi-participant surveys that HBOC organises, such as the Port Stephens Waterbird surveys and Broughton Island surveys. The full list and text can be seen in the Field Studies and Data Management report in Appendix B.

Data Collection and Management

HBOC has a variety of ways by which data from field studies and from opportunistic sightings by local birdwatchers are managed. 2013 again saw further entrenchment of the initiatives started in previous years and which have substantially enhanced HBOC's data capture and management capability and the analysis and reporting of data. An arrangement is in place with BLA to receive all the data for the Hunter Region from the BLA Atlas database ("Birdata"). In July 2013, HBOC received the 2012 data from the Atlas and also an updated data set for the period 1998-2011.

The main vehicle for data analysis and reporting is the Hunter Region Annual Bird Report. The 2012 Bird Report (#20 in the series) was published in late 2013, with data for 441 species. Once again, the Atlas data were included in the Report with also a summary of the full 15 years of prior data (for all locally common species).

HBOC's journal *The Whistler* is another important vehicle for data analysis and reporting. Volume 6 of *The Whistler* appeared in early 2013 and Volume 7 was published in December. Both issues contained a number of papers where the authors analysed data from regular surveys which they carry out.

HBOC is indebted to the Field Study and Data Management coordinators (Mike Newman and Alan Stuart) and to the many members, who organise and participate in acquiring and reporting observational data, for their expertise, dedication, and persistence in the pursuit of knowledge and better environmental outcomes for Hunter Region birds. Alan Stuart is the editor of the Annual Bird Report and his untiring commitment to this role is greatly appreciated and duly acknowledged, particularly on reaching the milestone of the 20th edition.

Please refer to the comprehensive Field Studies and Data Management Reports in Appendix B.

Records Appraisal

Records appraisal committees are a part of modern birdwatching nearly as much as binoculars. As our knowledge of the status and distribution of birds increases, there is also a need to 'manage' the reliability of the information that contributes to that knowledge. This is done within HBOC by the Records Appraisal Committee. The RAC assigns categories and decides whether records can be accepted. For 2013, the RAC members were Mick Roderick (Records Appraisal Officer), Ann Lindsey, Fred van Gessel, Phil Hansbro, Mike Newman, Craig Anderson and Allan Richardson.

A comprehensive outline of the roles and responsibilities of the RAC is to be published in the February edition of the HBOC Newsletter and will be available for download on the website.

21 cases were reviewed and decided upon by the RAC in 2013. No new birds for the Region were added as a result of these appraisals, though several reports were received and accepted for species for which there have been <5 substantiated records.

Additionally, 3 records were assessed by the NSW Ornithological Records Appraisal Committee (ORAC), all being accepted. These were:

ORAC Case # 570	Cook's Petrel	off Port Stephens	November 19, 2012
ORAC Case # 572	Red-footed Booby	Swansea	January 29, 2013
ORAC Case # 576	Bridled Tern	Newcastle	January 30, 2013

Of these, the Bridled Tern was a new species for the Hunter Region checklist.

No Hunter Region records of national significance were assessed by the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) in 2013, though one sighting made during 2013 (New Zealand Storm-Petrel off Swansea in April) is currently under review.

A full Records Appraisal Committee Report for 2013 can be seen in Appendix E.

9. Projects

Comprises the “hands on” conservation projects that restore selected areas of bird habitat in the Hunter.

A comprehensive run-down of works undertaken as part of the Ash Island and Stockton Sandspit Habitat Restoration Projects is available in Appendix C.

Ash Island: The effort to control mangrove seedlings in Area E (including the significant Swan and Wader Ponds) has become a sustainable project with only limited time required to control them in these areas. This is thanks to the hard work put in during previous years. Phoenix Flats was also completed in a single day before the more intensive effort at Milhams Pond commenced. Numerous site visits by a dedicated team, including assistance from professional contractors and spanning 7 months and nearly 200 person hours, saw Milham's Pond completed for 2013 in mid-September. Monitoring at Milhams Pond is showing that the challenge to control mangrove seedling recruitment here may be more difficult than first envisaged. Thought will need to be given to how to tackle this area into the future. The efficacy of the Mangrove Propagule Exclusion Devices in controlling the entry of incoming mangrove seeds also needs to be scrutinised, with some issues relating to high tide volumes and opportunities for seeds to break through the device noted during 2013.

A new permit from the Department of Primary Industries will be sought to continue work on Ash Island into 2014.

Stockton Sandspit: Volunteers once again contributed to habitat restoration at Stockton Sandspit in 2013. A total of 275.5 hours of volunteer work was carried out during the year. Since HBOC has been keeping records (April 2003) an aggregate of 4831 hours of volunteer work has accrued, totalling an impressive \$175,000 worth of in-kind work.

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. Ground-nesting Red-capped Plovers and Pied Oystercatchers enjoyed successes in the 2013 breeding season, much to the delight of the devoted volunteers that maintain their nesting habitat.

Members are encouraged to contribute their time to these projects to support the volunteer team and ensure the health of these shorebird habitats. The dedicated project manager (Tom Clarke) and volunteer team are to be congratulated for ensuring the successful rehabilitation of these sites.

10. The Whistler

HBOC's research-based, occasional periodical of refereed papers and notes that places on record observational details and analysis of HBOC members' field studies.

Please refer to the Joint Editors' Report in Appendix D.

Two volumes of *The Whistler* (Volumes 6 and 7) were produced and printed during each end of 2013. Priority was given to articles which had immediate conservation significance. In order to extend the authorship base members are encouraged to contribute, especially with regard to short articles. The Hunter-Central Rivers CMA generously provided \$1500 towards the publication costs demonstrating the value of *The Whistler* to land managers concerned with the protection of environmental assets of the Hunter Region.

Mike Newman and Harold Tarrant are editors of *The Whistler*, whilst Liz Crawford is the production manager. The other production and distribution personnel and of course the authors/referees, are congratulated and thanked for dedication to the demanding task of producing *The Whistler*.

11. Education & Promotion

To equip club members, the organisation and the broader community with the knowledge, skills and capacity to not only enhance the bird watching experience, but also to support the conservation of Hunter birdlife and its various habitats. This section includes avenues for members to champion birds, the environment and HBOC to the broader community.

For the purpose of this report these two aspects are linked as many HBOC activities have shared outcomes.

Website: The HBOC website continues to grow in stature as this year saw the website being archived in the National Database, PANDORA. The selection and national archiving, by the State Library of NSW, recognises the long-term benefit of this site to the Australian community and it will result in increased awareness of HBOC by those researchers using the library network. This is an honour for HBOC and a testament to the work of the HBOC webmasters. Congratulations! A special feature created in 2013 was the capability to join and renew Club membership on line via the website.

Publications: The Hunter Region Annual Bird Report No. 20 (2012) was published. This 20th milestone edition comprises 120 pages and records a total of 441 species for the Hunter Region while the first edition in 1993 held just 44 pages and a checklist of 269 species. The editor (Alan Stuart, who has been editor for each of the 20 years), production team and field observers are to be congratulated for this respected publication.

Volume seven of HBOC's occasional journal, "*The Whistler*" was prepared during the year and is currently available (refer to separate report).

Several members have authored or co-authored papers dealing with regional birds that have been published in periodicals such as *Australian Field Ornithology* and *Stilt*.

A new birding route brochure for the Maitland area was prepared and it is available electronically from the club's website (as are most of the prior birding route brochures).

Events: HBOC hosted the September meeting of the Bird Interest Group network (BIGnet) on the 7th and 8th of September at the Hunter Wetlands Centre. Apart from the customary BIGnet formalities, HBOC provided speakers who presented on the theme of "threatened species in the Hunter" on such topics as Rufous Scrub-birds, Regent Honeyeaters / Swift Parrots, White-fronted Chats, Australian Pied Oystercatchers and declining shorebirds of the Hunter Estuary. The presentation from the CEO of BirdLife Australia of the prestigious J. N. Hobbs Memorial Medal for amateur ornithology to Mike Newman was also made at the September BIGnet meeting.

As in previous years presentations were given under the Club banner to service clubs and other community-based groups.

Community events in which HBOC representatives participated included: Clean Up Australia Day, Kooragang Wetlands Family Festival, Marine Debris Clean Up in the Hunter Estuary, and Shorebirds Day at Stockton Sandspit. As in previous years the Biodiversity Day coordinated by the Green Corridor Coalition was a feature event for HBOC to foster interest and provide information to Hunter families about regional birds. This year's display focussed on the seabirds commonly found in Newcastle waters. Estimated attendance for the day was in excess of 900 people.

General: Club photographers continue to enhance the Club's educational resources by the donation of their photographs. Further attempts to augment the display-resource base of hands-on models and activities were undertaken.

12. Notable Highlights

The J.N. Hobbs Memorial Medal for 2012 was presented to Mike Newman at the BIGnet meeting in September 2013.

13. Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the assistance I have received during my second term as President of HBOC. As always there are too many individuals to mention, but rather I will express a collective thanks goes to those many people who have assisted in making this wonderful club function as effectively as it does.

Mick Roderick (HBOC President 2013) 7 February 2014