

## **Hunter Bird Observers Club 2023 Annual Report**

### **Introduction**

The 2023 Annual Report of the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was presented to members at the Annual General Meeting on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 2024. It is available via the club website at [www.hboc.org.au](http://www.hboc.org.au).

#### **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 2023, printed and presented separately, forms part of this section of the Annual Report.

During 2023 HBOC continued to maintain excellent relations with private and public organisations. The promotion of cooperative efforts is an important aspect of the role of Club management and that of the membership in general. The benefits of these collaborations are evident in virtually every aspect of the Club and we acknowledge the contributions of collaborative organisations and those members who have been involved in this regard. The Club has a deserved 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.

**Management Committee:** The following people volunteered their time to the Club, holding positions on the Management Committee during 2023: Dan Williams (President), Mick Roderick (Vice President), Marg Clarke (Hon. Secretary), Helen McCall (Hon. Treasurer), Liz Date-Huxtable, Greg Little, Judy Little, Jess Logan-Warner, Rob Kyte and Phil Straw. Liz and Phil were new to the committee. The Club gives thanks to Liz and Jess, who retired from their positions on the Management Committee at the end of the year. They will both continue to support the Club in the areas of Education and Social Media, respectively.

**Website:** The Club's website is an essential administrative and communication tool and is the platform through which membership applications and renewals are handled and that current information regarding upcoming Club activities is communicated. It also provides a portal through which to access many of the publications that the Club produces.

Throughout the year, progress has been made regarding the required transition to a new website platform, including the identification of essential services the website provides, how the new website will look and be structured. The procurement of services to construct the new website and train several people in adding content to the site has now been confirmed and we look forward to this being delivered within the next few months. Thanks are given to Rob Kyte who has been instrumental in driving this process.

**Club Membership:** Our Treasurer, Helen McCall, continued the recording responsibilities of membership during 2023. She communicated with new and renewing members and maintains a membership skills register to help find matches between the needs of the Club and capabilities that the membership has to offer. Helen also provided a comprehensive monthly report from the membership register to the Committee each month.

As of 31 December 2023, there were an estimated 462 financial memberships of HBOC, which is over a 10% increase from previous three years. Note that family memberships are counted as two members and the totals consider changes in membership type and members leaving the club.

## 2. Activities

**This includes the planning, organisation and participation in the leisure-based birdwatching and social activities of the Club.**

**Club Meetings:** As planned, Club Meetings returned to the pre-COVID format, as “hybrid” meetings are difficult to maintain. However, digital recording equipment was purchased by the Club to enable the recording of speakers. These recordings are then shared with Club Members and ultimately hosted on the Club’s YouTube Channel (given appropriate speaker authorisation). Thanks go to Lene Parashou for volunteering to manage this task.

The return to a “traditional” format, coupled with the continuation of earlier ‘supper’ refreshments, has produced a good increase in the number of people attending the Club Meetings. The speaker program was varied in content, of a high quality and very well-received by the Members who attended throughout the year.

Whilst not a Club-run activity, many members continue to gather at the Shortland Hotel after the monthly Club Meetings. This is a beneficial aspect of attending the meetings, as it enables further social engagement and discussion about all things ‘birding’ between members.

The library is accessible at Club Meetings and comprises more than 450 books, 66 reports and issues of journals related to Australian birding. New additions to the library are often received and a recent culling of outdated material was also undertaken recently.

**Outdoor activities:** The Club ran a full programme of outings during 2023. This includes the monthly Sunday and midweek outings, camps and other events, primarily focusing on the recreational needs of members. The Australia Day camp at Smiths Lake and Easter camp at Macquarie Marshes were well attended, but the June long weekend camp at Dungog was less successful. Two popular camps were held in October – the mid-week camp at Mudgee and long weekend camp at Norville (formerly Rockdhu), Blandford.

The Club continued with the biannual nocturnal and seabird outings initiated in 2022 but with mixed success. The July seabird outing went ahead but a few people who booked in were a no-show on the day, with the October trip cancelled due to a lack of interest. The April nocturnal outing to Bow Wow Gorge yielded another zero return on nocturnal bird species but was still a good night out. The November nocturnal outing to Wallaroo NP was cancelled due to a lack of interest. The continuation of these biannual events will be reviewed at the end of 2024.

**Photography:** The HBOC Photography sub-committee meets twice per year. Interest in photography amongst members and the wider community continues to grow.

Images contributed to HBOC’s Bird Image Library (BIL) are managed by Rob Palazzi (BIL Manager) and most of the images held are now on display in the BIL section of the SmugMug website (<https://hbo-bird-gallery.smugmug.com/>). The BIL contains over 24,000 images, with the overall level of quality being excellent. However, more images are always needed, and the club would encourage anyone to look carefully at their photographs and submit any they feel would add to this excellent resource – please contact [birdimages@hbo.org.au](mailto:birdimages@hbo.org.au)

Members Galleries on the SmugMug website continue to be available to all members to showcase their bird images. There is no restriction on the number of images that can be uploaded. Members who would like to showcase their bird photos, can contact the Secretary at [secretary@hboc.org.au](mailto:secretary@hboc.org.au)

We have also been updating the Photo Milestone Club and several of our photographers have moved past the 200 and 250 and 300 levels in 2023, with Alan Stuart now beyond 350. Check it out at <https://www.hboc.org.au/milestone-clubs/hunter-bird-photos/>

**Hunter 300 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. Badges are currently available for those reaching the 300, 350 and 400 species milestones. In 2023 several new people joined the 300 Club and their names, along with their total number of species seen, the date of their latest addition and their prediction for the next new Hunter species were added to the website. One member received their 400 Club badge in 2023 (Bruce Watts) with the sighting of the Sooty Albatross on a Port Stephens pelagic on May 22<sup>nd</sup>.

### 3. Study and Conservation

*This section encompasses the collection of data, monitoring and study of birds and the protection of birds and their habitat in the Hunter Region and beyond.*

**Field Studies:** 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. The Club continues to run many regular systematic surveys across the Region, with members also participating in the nationally coordinated Latham's Snipe surveys.

The monthly shorebird surveys are the largest and longest running systematic survey effort that is coordinated by the Club, with many members having been involved at some stage. These are supplemented by regular surveys of important wetlands within the Hunter Estuary.

The Broughton Island and Rufous Scrub-bird surveys are mini expeditions that include nights away from home in spectacular environments. As well as collecting data for scientifically significant research, they also provide opportunity for socialisation.

The Club also supports local land care groups in the ongoing monitoring of woodland habitats and their restoration, with quarterly McCullys Gap, Luskintyre Valley, Martindale Valley, and Earthcare Park surveys.

In addition to the systematic surveys, all records from Club outings and camps are entered into Birdata.

Records appraisal is undertaken by a Records Appraisal Committee that oversees the assessment of rare and unusual reports of birds in the Region. The RAC reviews records of species that are vagrant to the Hunter Region but are not within the remit of the state (ORAC) or national (BARC) committees. These species are assigned as "Category 3" in the Annual Bird Report and an annual report from the RAC is provided as an appendix to the ABR.

**Drone Surveys:** The Club has now established a Drone Sub-committee to manage future use of the two Club drones (with one having thermal imaging capability). The maintenance of appropriate qualifications and training for pilots and procedures for correct use of the drones for the purposes of Club surveys is no small undertaking. Thanks is given to Rob Kyte for his efforts in getting our house in order in this regard.

Much of the drone survey effort this year has been for the monitoring of breeding Black-necked Storks in the Hunter Estuary. It is expected that future uses will include further Australasian Bittern surveys and shorebird monitoring. The Club is also investigating the potential for selling drone survey services as an opportunity to cover the long-term costs associated with the drone ownership.

**Conservation:** HBOC continues to take part in campaigns against overdevelopment that impinge on important bird habitat in the Hunter Region and elsewhere. These campaigns are time-consuming and sometimes frustrating, and we thank our conservation sub-committee for their efforts. Geoff Coates and Brianna Coulter departed the sub-committee at the beginning of the year and Phil Straw has recently joined. Thanks go to the two formers for their contributions.

Key submissions/letters in 2023 included:

- Letters sent to the Victorian Premier and the Minister for Planning and Outdoor Recreation about duck hunting in Victoria.
- Submission made to Land Com opposing a housing subdivision in bushland at Myall Road Garden Suburb, which is a known Powerful Owl breeding site.
- Letters sent to the NSW Minister for Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Heritage, to the NSW Minister for Local Government, and to Tanya Plibersek regarding the impact of feral and domestic cats on wildlife.
- Submission made to Lake Macquarie City Council objecting to the proposed BlackRock Motor Park at Wakefield/Teralba expressing our concerns about the acoustic impacts to local birdlife in particular owls. Both the Powerful Owl and Masked Owl have been recorded on the site.

All submissions are available for more detailed reading on the HBOC website under the Conservation tab. Members of the conservation committee have shown dedication and perseverance and I thank them for the time they have invested in the interests of the welfare of Australian birdlife and their habitats. Conservation is a core activity of the Club and requires dedicated effort from volunteers such as Ann to fight on behalf of the community for a better future for our birds.

Two large renewable energy projects are planned for the Hunter Region – the offshore wind farms and the Hunter Transmission Project, both of which have the potential for impacts to bird conservation. The sub-committee is actively monitoring these and will consider making submissions at the appropriate times.

Since 2003, under Tom Clarke, Club members have maintained a constant volunteer effort with various restoration works in the Hunter Estuary. These projects all focus on shorebird habitat and the project sites have been chosen for their strategic importance to the birds. Currently the combined projects cover over 150 ha of the Hunter Wetlands National Park.

To do this, permission from NPWS and Department of Primary Industries and Environment (DPIE) is required. A renewed permit (PN20-194) under Part 7 of the Fisheries Management Act 1994 allows “*harm to marine vegetation associated with mangrove management at Hunter Wetlands National Park, Hunter River, multiple sites*”. This latest permit has been issued for five years and is in force until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

Much of the Club’s field work and survey efforts are now registered in the NPWS VIP program, allowing volunteers’ hours to be tracked and providing insurance cover for them.

Separate supporting annual reports are produced for the Club’s conservation efforts, and these should be referred to for further detail.

#### **4. Education and Communication**

*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.*

The Education and Promotion Sub-committee is one of the largest growth areas of the Club. Thanks go to Liz Date-Huxtable and her team for their dedication to this field. The Fledglings initiative continued its quarterly

program targeted at children aged 5-12 for a second year, with events held at Maitland and East Maitland Libraries, Hunter Region Botanic Gardens and Stockton Sand Spit.

The Club hosted the annual BIGnet meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> September and organised a “Hunter Bird Forum” to coincide with it. The morning began with a bird walk around the Hunter Wetlands Centre, followed by the BIGnet AGM and then a day containing several quality presentations covering a range of bird study and research being undertaken in the Region. The event was capped off with a social dinner at the Shortland Waters Golf Club and was very well received. A huge thanks to Helen McCall for organising the event and Rowley Smith for ensuring that the technical side of things ran smoothly on the day.

Several educational bird walks were participated in during the year, including walks for the Muscle Creek community (quarterly), City of Newcastle shorebirds, LMCC Great Outdoors and Honeyeater Migration events at Belmont Wetlands State Park, Hunter Wetlands Centre World Wetland Day and Seniors Week, Woodland Wander at Stanford Merthyr, Photography Bird Walk at Hunter Wetlands Centre and U3A Newcastle Hunter Wetlands Centre bird walk.

The follow-up to last year’s inaugural “Our Bushland” Festival was again held at Poppethead Park in Kitchener and included HBOC as one of the many key stakeholders. The festival learnt from the challenges of the previous year and the event was bigger and better. We look forward to the continuation of this now popular event on the calendar.

Keith Eastwood again delivered a series of Birdwatching Beginners classes to the Lake Macquarie U3A. Individual presentations were also given by Club members to U3A Newcastle, U3a Lake Macquarie and Newcastle Rotary.

Other events participated in throughout the year included:

- Farewell to Shorebirds at Stockton Sand Spit.
- Hunter Estuary field excursion for TAFE Diploma of Conservation and Ecosystem Management.
- Presentation on the importance of hollows at Hunter Regional Botanic Gardens.
- Total Field Days stall in the Hunter LLS marquee.
- Maitland Youth Forum at Gillieston Heights Community Hub.
- New Members Day at Hunter Wetlands Centre.
- Breakfast with the Birds at Earthcare Park.
- Muswellbrook Sustainability Hub, with a promotion of Aussie Bird Count Week.

***Wilma Barden Memorial Grant:*** In 2023 the Wilma Barden Memorial Grant sub-committee awarded an individual \$3000 grant to member Judy Little to assist in her Hunter Region Migratory Shorebird Monitoring project.

***Sue & Ed Hamonet Memorial Award for Excellence:*** In 2023 the Sue & Ed Hamonet Memorial Award was established. It is to award groups or individuals in the participation of community education of birdlife and its conservation.

***E-news:*** The eNews, continues to be a quality publication and an important means of communication, which links members within the Club through its news reports and other birding articles. The monthly digital format allows us to be flexible while at the same time encouraging members to read further.

The many members who contribute articles and photographs to the Newsletter are thanked for their interest, time and effort, and I thank the eNews team for their contribution. Copies of previous eNews publications are available on the Club’s website: <https://www.hboc.org.au/publications/newsletters/>

**Social Media:** The Clubs Facebook and Instagram accounts continue to grow in both membership and content. Thanks go to Jess Logan-Warner for her ongoing contribution. The YouTube channel is being populated with recordings of Club Meeting presentation, but we would welcome additional appropriate content. We look forward to improved cross-platform media sharing opportunities with the development of the new Club website.

The *Hunterbirding* online forum is mainly for sharing local bird information, reporting sightings and for general discussion. Hunterbirding is firmly established as the important go-to place where local issues, such as identification and interesting sightings are first disseminated to many within the wider Hunter birdwatching community, particularly those that are not active on social media. Lene Parashou has recently stepped down from the role of principal moderator and administrator and I thank her for her contribution.

The e-mail service continues to play a vital role in Club communications. This efficient means of distributing important messages and information keeps members informed, especially between Newsletters. It also provides the means through which members receive their eNews. Thanks go to Rob Kyte for his maintenance of this service to the membership.

## 5. Publications

***To contribute to the scientific, birdwatching and broader community with the publication of important materials, documenting key findings of the Club's vast knowledge and experience base.***

***The Whistler:*** is the Club's research-based, occasional periodical of refereed papers and notes that places on record observational details and analysis of HBOC members' field studies. Articles produced for *The Whistler* are published on an individual basis when ready and access is provided to the public through the Club's website. Once sufficient material is available, the editorial team produce a formal journal issue which is then made available in both digital and hardcopy formats. Volume 17 of *The Whistler* was finalised in late 2023. Congratulations to joint editors Neil Fraser and Alan Stuart, the production team and all members that contributed articles.

***Hunter Region Annual Bird Report:*** The production of the ABR is still behind schedule, with the 2019 edition remaining the most recent publication. However, the next edition is finally nearing the publication stage thanks largely to several volunteers who stepped up to assist in the summarisation of records for individual species groups. The edition will cover 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2020 through 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021, with subsequent issues spanning 1<sup>st</sup> Jun through 31<sup>st</sup> May. The process of volunteer assistant editors has worked well and the plan is to release two ABRs each calendar year to bring the publication back to currency.

***Other Publications:*** In addition to *The Whistler* and ABR, the Club produces several other periodic publications, including the monthly 'Featured Bird' articles written by Alan Stuart and the 'Birding Route' brochures to which many members contribute. The quality of all material that the Club publishes is of the highest quality and we are indebted to Rob Kyte for his generous contribution of skill and time in this regard.

## 6. Acknowledgments

The Club continues to grow in many areas, including membership, social media, and community education. Through our consistent efforts in field studies and conservation, supported by high quality publications, the Club is well respected by its peers, industry, and the broader community. As we move forward into 2024, we can be excited about an imminent new Club website and the many opportunities that it will bring to further serve our members and raise our profile.

Thanks go to Mick Roderick, Marg Clarke and Helen McCall (and others on the Management Committee – particularly Rob Kyte for his many contributions in 2023) for their continued support – they make my job much easier. Thanks also to the 40 or so members of the eight sub-committees, who do a lot of work in the

background to reduce the discussion and decision-making required by the Management Committee. Finally, a huge thank you to everyone that has otherwise not been acknowledged either directly or implicitly through the summary above.

**Dan Williams** (HBOC President 2023) 14 February 2024