

Survival and longevity of an oiled Australian Pelican and a summary of recent data for movement by banded birds in the Hunter Region

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On 4 May 2024 I saw a banded Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* on the beach on the north side of Stockton Sandspit, New South Wales (see **Figure 1**). It was the only banded bird in a small flock of around 20 pelicans. With the aid of binoculars and a spotting scope I was able to read the band numbers (band ID: 17026665). My subsequent enquiry to the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme (ABBBS) revealed that it had been banded on 24 September 2010 (N. Perring pers. comm.). This is the longest recovery interval for an Australian Pelican in the Hunter Region (**Table 1**). The bird had adult plumage when banded, i.e. it was at least one year of age, and thus it was at least 14 years and 7 months old in May 2024.

The close-up image of the pelican's leg profiles (**Figure 1 lower**) highlights the ovoid leg shape of this species. The photo shows clearly the bulky front profile of the left leg, and the narrower side profile of the right leg.

The bird was one of 35 pelicans rescued following an oil spill from the *Magdalene* on 25 August 2010 in the south arm of the Hunter River adjoining Newcastle Harbour, Kooragang Island. The affected birds were captured, carefully cleaned of oil and dried by trained volunteers, and then transferred to Taronga Zoo for rehabilitation (Crawford 2010; WIRES 2010). All the rescued birds were released later at Stockton North Boat Ramp which is located approximately two km south of Stockton Sandspit (**Figure 2**).

Prior to their release back into the Hunter Estuary, each pelican was banded, under an NSW government initiative approved by the ABBBS (N. Perring pers. comm.).

Banded Australian Pelican sightings and movements in the Hunter Region

I also saw a banded pelican on 11 May 2024 amongst a flock of over 350 pelicans on the

Kooragang Dykes on the western side of the south arm of the Hunter River but could not read the band number. However, there have been confirmed sightings of eleven banded pelicans in the Hunter and Port Stephens areas since the September 2010 release, with a total of 23 re-sightings i.e. some birds have been seen more than once. The details are provided in **Table 1**. Five of the birds were part of the cohort that was banded following the oil spill, two were banded following rehabilitation, and the other four were banded at breeding locations outside of the Hunter Region.



Figure 1: The banded Australian Pelican (band ID: 17026665) at Stockton Sandspit, New South Wales on 4 May 2024. Upper image is of the bird preening in the water. Lower image is a record of the band on the lower right tarsus. (Photos: G. Little).

Table 1: Australian Pelican re-sightings in the Hunter and Port Stephens estuaries since September 2010, showing banding location and date, age, sex (where known), banding location, recovery location and date, and distance travelled from banding location and time since banding in years and months (data courtesy of ABBBS). N = nestling, M = male, F = female, U = unknown sex.

Band ID	Date Banded	Age when banded	Sex	Banding Locality	Recovery Locality	Date Recovered	Distance km	Interval since banding
17026631	28/04/2015	1+	U	Belmont, Lake Macquarie	Boatrowers Reserve Blacksmiths	2/04/2016	11	11mths
17026648	18/12/2014	1+	U	Pelican Island, Blackwall Bay	Pacific Highway Belmont	15/11/2017	57	2yrs 10mths
17026653	17/09/2010	1+	M	Hunter Estuary	Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	16/03/2014	2	3yrs 5mth
					Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	2/09/2014	2	3yrs 11mths
					Stockton Sandspit	23/01/2016	0	5yrs 4mths
17026660	24/09/2010	1+	M	Hunter Estuary	Stockton Sandspit	23/01/2016	0	5yrs 3mths
17026665	24/09/2010	1+	M	Hunter Estuary	Stockton Sandspit	4/05/2024	9	13yrs 7mths
17026666	28/09/2010	1+	F	Hunter Estuary	Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	13/03/2014	2	3yrs 5mths
					Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	9/08/2014	2	3yrs 10mths
					Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	11/10/2014	2	4yrs
17026674	8/10/2010	1+	F	Hunter Estuary	Hunter River North Arm	07/01/2011	10	2mths
					Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	02/10/2013	2	2yrs 11mths
					Stockton Fish Cleaning Station	13/03/2014	2	3yrs 5mths
					Stockton Sandspit	23/01/2016	0	5yrs 3mths
17027217	12/12/2018	1	U	Crescent Island Gippsland Lakes	Soldiers Point	15/08/2021	702	2yrs 8mths
					Soldiers Point	15/05/2022	702	3yrs 5mths
17027251	7/12/2020	3+	F	North Arm Gippsland Lakes	Little Beach, Nelson Bay	9/07/2022	688	1yr 7mths
					Little Beach, Nelson Bay	4/09/2022	688	1yrs 8mths
					Little Beach, Nelson Bay	15/09/2022	688	1yrs 9mths
17027335	11/02/2022	N	U	Crescent Island Gippsland Lakes	Stockton Sandspit	2/07/2022	673	4mths
					Carrington Boat Ramp, Newcastle	29/09/2022	666	7mths
17027770	8/08/2022	1+	U	Narrabeen Fitness Camp Narrabeen	Little Beach, Nelson Bay	7/08/2023	138	11mths



Figure 2: Map showing approximate location of oil spill (light blue), Stockton North Boat Ramp release location (yellow) and 4 May 2024 sighting of banded Australian Pelican on Stockton Sandspit (red). (Modified from Google Maps, accessed 26 May 2024).

Of the eleven individuals in **Table 1**, all were sighted alive in the Hunter Region except for the bird with band ID 17026648; it collided with a motor vehicle and died of its injuries. Information about the other nine birds is presented below.

In 2022 two Australian Pelicans with red readable bands (reading 251 and 335) were in the Hunter and Port Stephens estuaries. Both had been banded in the Gippsland Lakes area in Victoria at distances of 673-688 km from the Hunter Estuary and 702 km from the Port Stephens site (ABBBS Sept. 2024).

On 2 July 2022 an Australian Pelican with band ID 17027335 and a red band number 335 (J. Little & G. Little pers. obs.) was at Stockton Sandspit. Later, this bird suffered a fishing line/hook injury and was rescued and taken into care by members of Hunter Wildlife Rescue at Carrington, near Newcastle NSW on 29 September 2022 (A. Williams pers. comm.). It was subsequently released within a few days at Soldiers Point in Port Stephens. The bird had

been banded originally as a nestling on 11 February 2022 (ABBBS Sept. 2024).

An Australian Pelican with band ID 17027251 and a red band number 251 was observed at Little Beach, Nelson Bay NSW three times in 2022 the first being on 9 July 2022 and then on 4 September 2022 (R. Kyte pers. comm.) and again, at the same location on 15 September 2022 (N. Fraser pers. comm.). This bird had been banded on 07 December 2020 and was aged then as being a 3+ years old female, thus being over 4 years and 9 months old at time of the last sighting (ABBBS Sept. 2024).

The bird with band ID 17026666 was found dead at Patonga Beach on the Central Coast, three and a half months after the last record in the Hunter Region (ABBBS Sept. 2024).

The only pelican in **Table 1** banded as an adult (band ID 17027251) was banded at a breeding site in Victoria. In addition to the Hunter Region

sightings, the bird had several records from outside of the Hunter Estuary, being sighted in Merimbula (28 August 2021), Eden (26 September 2021), Tuncurry Boat Ramp (12 June 2022) and Old Tallawarra Ash Ponds, Lake Illawarra (5 January 2023). The greatest movement (to Tuncurry) being 755 km from the place of banding (ABBBS Sept. 2024). The other two birds banded at breeding sites in Victoria were young birds.

Frequent re-sightings of some of the oiled birds suggest they are part of a local flock. The Hunter Region Annual Bird Reports (Stuart 2012-2018; Williams 2019-2020) indicate that the closest breeding colonies to the Hunter Estuary are in Wallis Lake on Pelican Island and Snake Island. However, the natal origins of these birds are uncertain and further studies, including tracking studies, would be required to determine where the 'Hunter' flocks breed.

There are currently a number of ABBBS-approved projects involving the banding of Australian Pelicans in various inland lakes in New South Wales and Victoria, with readable bands of differing colours being deployed at each lake (ABBBS Sept. 2024). There should be better understandings about pelican movements in south-eastern Australia if birdwatchers report any sightings of banded pelicans to the ABBBS.

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