



Conservation

DON SAUNDERS AND JENNY LAU

Eastern Great Egret. Photo: R. Mackenzie

SOUTH COAST SHOREBIRDS, NSW

A decade ago the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service established the South Coast Shorebird Recovery Program (the Program) to assist threatened species of shorebirds which breed on shoreline habitat between Wollongong and the Victorian border. The most recent South Coast Shorebird Recovery Newsletter (NSW) has an extensive report on shorebird breeding across this area for the 2008/09 season.

The Program is still sponsored and overseen by Government agencies, but relies on a vast network of volunteers to provide monitoring and protection of the four species of concern: Hooded Plover, Little Tern, Australian Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers. When breeding, all four species face a range of threats, including foxes, avian predators, inundation, abandonment and sand coverage, so the annual report on the Program always contains some disappointments regardless of the dedicated efforts of the many volunteers.

The report on the Recovery Program for 2008/09 describes it as “another good season”. Extracts from the report are quoted below.

“The Little Terns set up colonies at eight breeding sites along the southern coastline of NSW this season. In total approximately 177 breeding pairs laid 641 eggs, hatched 273 chicks and fledged at least 143 of these chicks. This is a great result and up there with the best seasons on record. Numerous Fairy Terns also nested amongst the Little Terns especially in the Far South Coast Region. This species has declined especially in Victoria. Our 28 breeding pairs fledged at least seven chicks. We will continue to monitor this species in southern NSW.”

“The endangered Hooded Plovers had one of their best seasons yet with 14 chicks fledged from the 16 breeding pairs. Furthermore we had our first signs of recruitment early in the season with four young adults present in the South Coast Region, presumed last season’s fledglings returning. Two paired up and even nested together. Exciting!”

“Australian Pied Oystercatchers nested in most estuaries along the south coast. A total of 38 breeding pairs incubated 90 eggs, hatched 46 chicks and fledged 22.”

Overall a good result but breeding success was reduced compared with previous seasons. The Sooty Oystercatchers, nested on all eight offshore islands as with previous years. Eighty pairs of Sooty Oystercatchers were observed with 74-78 eggs, 17-29 chicks and at least two fledglings. A further three pairs were found nesting on the mainland.”

More information, including updates on nesting success throughout the season, is available on the South Coast Shorebird Recovery Program Website www.southcoastshorebirds.com.au.

WOODLAND BIRDS IN TROUBLE

Most birders would be aware that the loss, degradation and fragmentation of woodland habitats across southern Australia has led to declines in woodland bird populations. When three research groups combined the results of their independent studies of woodland birds from a 30,000 km² area of northern Victoria, they found solid evidence of a serious collapse of the avifauna of eucalypt woodlands in south-eastern Australia.

Around two-thirds of all species had declined in occurrence over a five year period from 2002–2007. The declines occurred across all feeding and nesting guilds, irrespective of species’ sensitivities to spatial dynamics such as habitat fragmentation and irrespective of conservation status. This means that common species were just as likely to have suffered declines as threatened species, and declines were observed across all landscapes including large, intact areas of woodland within the conservation reserve system. Common species such as Fuscous Honeyeater, Laughing Kookaburra, Rufous Whistler and Superb Fairy-wren are among those that showed large declines.

While historical loss and degradation of woodlands has driven the ongoing decline in threatened species such as Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot, the researchers stated that these recent declines are most likely the result of the ongoing drought/ climate change in south-eastern Australia. Reduced rainfall and higher temperatures have led to declines in both food availability and habitat quality. The fact that eucalypts failed to flower in three out of six years between 2002 and 2007 (the long-term average is in the order of one in six years) was seen as the most likely cause of the decline in nectarivorous species such as Red Wattlebird, Musk Lorikeet and Yellow-tufted Honeyeater.

It was also hypothesised that lower soil moisture and loss of understory vegetation have led to decreases in the abundance of invertebrates and therefore reduced food availability for insectivorous bird species such as Red-capped Robin and Rufous Whistler. Loss of understorey also impacts on breeding success by reducing the availability of nesting sites.

The researchers suggested a range of options for enhancing woodland birds' capacity to cope with climate change. Existing reserves may be managed to improve structural complexity by retaining large old trees, overly dense stands of regrowth can be thinned to facilitate rapid growth of retained stems and sites can be managed to retain coarse woody debris. However, most of the existing woodland conservation reserve system is on rocky, infertile sites; areas 'left over' after more fertile areas had been cleared for agriculture.

The greatest gains for woodland birds and the entire woodland ecosystem are likely to be achieved through targeted restoration of woodlands on more fertile land such as riparian and floodplain areas. These sites support higher plant growth rates and the eucalypts that grow on these sites, such as Yellow Box *Eucalyptus melliodora* and River Red Gum *E. camaldulensis*, flower during warmer months than the eucalypts of box-ironbark forests, extending the availability of food resources for nectarivores. The researchers also stated that planted areas that contain a diversity of shrubs and young trees appear to support greater breeding activity of birds, so restored areas would provide a source of young birds that could then move out across the landscape into more established areas.

The research highlights the need for a strategic plan to recover the woodland ecosystems that support our woodland birds. This will require broad support from the governments and communities that manage our woodlands, including a greater commitment of resources from government to fund on-ground projects that will benefit our woodland birds.

HOW BOCA IS HELPING OUR WOODLAND BIRDS

The Victoria Naturally Alliance, of which BOCA is a member, has been working hard to bring the plight of our woodland birds to the attention of the wider community and our politicians. For more information on the study and to find out how you can help our woodland birds go to: www.victorianaturally.org.au.

BOCA is also working with Trust for Nature (Victoria) and Birds Australia on a joint woodland birds conservation project. The project aims to: identify priority landscapes for woodland bird conservation; develop a regional monitoring strategy for woodland birds; and develop a woodland bird conservation strategy for Victoria. BOCA will be asking its members to become involved in the implementation of the monitoring strategy in early 2010. While the project is focussed on woodlands in Victoria, the outcomes of the project will have implications for the management of woodlands across south-eastern Australia.



Grey Shrike-thrush is one of many species usually considered to be common which have declined substantially in woodland areas Photo: Duncan Turnbull

Table 1: Average percentage decrease in reporting rates for species characterised according to foraging guilds.

Frugivore	44%
Insectivore	71%
Nectarivore	63%
Raptor/vertebrate	53%
Granivore	63%

Source: Mac Nally *et al.* (2009)

Table 2: Bird species found to have declined substantially.

Insectivores	
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	Restless Flycatcher
Buff-rumped Thornbill	Rufous Songlark
Brown Treecreeper	Rufous Whistler
Crested Bellbird	Sacred Kingfisher
Crested Shrike-tit	Southern Whiteface
Eastern Yellow Robin	Spotted Pardalote
Golden Whistler	Superb Fairy-wren
Grey Fantail	Varied Sittella
Grey Shrike-thrush	Welcome Swallow
Hooded Robin	Western Gerygone
Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo	White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike
Laughing Kookaburra	White-browed Babbler
Olive-backed Oriole	White-browed Scrubwren
Rainbow Bee-eater	White-browed Woodswallow
Red-browed Finch	Yellow Thornbill
Red-capped Robin	
Nectarivores	
Black-chinned Honeyeater	Swift Parrot
Brown-headed Honeyeater	Yellow-tufted Honeyeater
Fuscous Honeyeater	White-naped Honeyeater
Purple-crowned Lorikeet	

Reference: Mac Nally, R., Bennett, A. F., Thomson, J. R., Radford, J. Q., Unmack, G., Horrocks, G., Vesk, P. A. (2009). 'Collapse of an avifauna: climate change appears to exacerbate habitat loss and degradation.' *Diversity & Distributions*, Vol. 15(4): 720-730.

TRAVELLING STOCK ROUTES

Travelling stock routes (TSRs) are corridors of public land set aside for drovers to use when moving stock to markets or other pastures. They criss-cross eastern Australia, most extensively in NSW and Qld. TSRs traverse low-lying and fertile areas and contain remnants of ecological communities that are poorly represented in the conservation reserve system, including woodland ecosystems that have largely been cleared from the wheat-sheep belt of south-eastern Australia.

An alliance of conservation groups, the Stock Routes Coalition (which includes BOCA through our Brisbane branch, BrisBOCA), has been actively lobbying for TSRs to remain in public ownership and for them to be managed primarily for biodiversity conservation. The Coalition has argued that as well as containing significant remnants of ecological communities, TSRs play a vital role in maintaining ecological connectivity across eastern Australia. However, there has been little scientific research into how species, including birds, are utilising TSRs to move across the landscape.

In Queensland, the State Government released the *Stock Route Network Management Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS)* for public comment, which closed in October 2009. This follows an earlier report by the Stock Route Assessment Panel in July 2008 titled *Improving the Management and Use of the Stock Route Network*.

The new arrangements if implemented could have some advantages for biodiversity but will require intensive management and monitoring, particularly by local government, to be fully effective.

An important feature is the undertaking by the Government that the entire stock route network will be retained. Static grazing, as distinct for travelling stock, will be permitted in sections of the stock route network under Annual Grazing Agreements (AGAs). In many cases these will formalise previously unregulated grazing, in other cases replace existing permits to occupy.

The RIS states that "AGAs will require pastoralists to meet the criteria of land condition assessments to ensure the network retains its biodiversity value and as a nature corridor for the migration of flora and fauna and the gradual adaptation of species to climate change". While this is commendable, it will be difficult to enforce and it is hoped that this new system does not work as an incentive for local government to continue to issue AGAs as a revenue stream rather than managing the network for all its values, including biodiversity, cultural heritage and recreation.

In NSW, a new study being undertaken by researchers at the Australian National University will examine the importance of the TSR network for migrating woodland birds. Pia Lentini will examine whether woodland birds preferentially use the TSR

network of the central wheat-sheep belt of central NSW, rather than surrounding agricultural lands, during the spring migration. A pilot study was undertaken in spring this year and further studies will follow in spring 2010. Pia is looking for volunteers to take part in the study. For more details contact pia.lentini@anu.edu.au.

BROLGA RECOVERY GROUP TAKES SHAPE

In the April 2009 edition of *The Bird Observer* we reported the formation of a steering committee for a new 'Friends of the Brolga Group'. The steering committee has secured a start-up grant from the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority and has decided to become a BOCA special interest group that will be known as the 'Brolga Recovery Group'. The group will advocate on behalf of the threatened Brolga population of south-western Victoria and will investigate ways to help local landholders enhance Brolga habitat on their land.

BROLGAS PLAYING OR PRACTICING?

The newsletter of BOCA's Echuca and District Branch (Vic), *Plainswanderer* No 56, October – November 2009, records a very interesting activity by a Brolga.

Murray Chambers observed a male Brolga "showing off to his partner by throwing a stone in the air and jumping up to catch it". In a photograph which Murray took at the time you can see the stone in mid-air after the Brolga had thrown it in front of itself – then jumped forward to catch it! The Brolga did this several times.

HANZAB Vol 2 notes that the Brolga dancing display often starts with a bird picking up grass then tossing and catching it in its bill, but there is no mention of doing this with stones.

Has this been recorded by other observers?

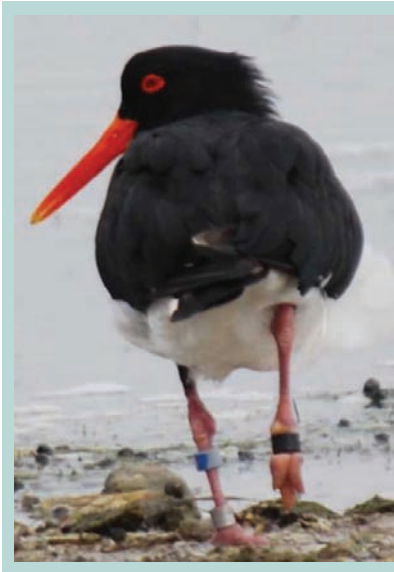
OYSTERCATCHER BANDS

Over the years a number of BOCA members have expressed concern about Australian Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers which were crippled or had lost a leg and were wearing coloured leg-bands.

BOCA wrote to the Victorian Wader Study Group (VWSG), which has a long history of banding oystercatchers, asking whether the VWSG had implemented any changes in banding practices (type of band, number of bands, placement, etc) to reduce the incidence of injuries.

The President of VWSG, Dr Clive Minton, has sent a comprehensive response to our enquiry which is outlined below.

"We started banding oystercatchers in Victoria in early 1979 (one of the first catch of 11 birds, was recaptured, still alive, last year!). We used a single spiral colour band to indicate area of origin. In the late 1980s we moved to an individual marking arrangement whereby a colour above the metal band on one leg gave the marking location (eg



Avalon Beach (Vic), March 2009. The black plastic band on the right leg of this Australian Pied Oystercatcher has slipped down and is constricting its foot. Dr Minton advised that this bird would have been banded at Werribee between 1988 and 2001. Originally there would have been three coloured bands on the right leg but two have been lost, therefore it is not possible to identify the individual. If the bird could be relocated and the band was still constricting its foot, Dr Minton offered to try to catch the bird and remove the band.

Photo: John Dent

blue = Werribee) and the three colour bands on the other leg enabled the bird to be identified individually.

“Occasional problems were encountered initially with colour bands relaxing, presumably because of occasional high temperatures. This was solved by ‘glueing’ (PVC Solvent Cement) the outer end of the flat spiral to prevent it coming undone. In the mid-1990s some problems were also found with the inner part of the colour band contracting (and becoming too tight on the leg) a result of the ingress of coarse sand between the layers of the spirals. This problem was overcome with all colour bands also being glued at their inner ends, from about 1997 onwards.

“In the last ten or more years foot problems associated with colour bands have rarely been seen (we recapture a lot of our banded birds each year) or reported by others. Nevertheless, since about 2004, we made a further change to our marking procedures. This was triggered by the advent of engraved plastic flags for marking waders. So since then Oystercatchers (both Sooty and Australian Pied) have been marked with a single engraved coloured plastic flag on the right tibia and the metal band is now placed on the left tibia.

“We moved to marking on the tibia because oystercatchers worldwide have a greater tendency to incur leg and foot injuries (quite irrespective of any banding or colour marking) than other species of waders. This is because they have much softer, fleshier legs and feet. They also tend to inhabit areas on beaches where they are likely to pick up fishing line. They have also been recorded with algal weed, wool, etc around legs or toes [10% of the oystercatchers on The Wash in the UK have foot/leg injuries from sheep’s wool they pick up on their breeding grounds in Norway].

“Experience over the last five years suggests this flagging/ banding on the tibia works well and no problems have been reported (though it is harder for an observer to record the flag engraving – A1, O1, 1A, AA etc – than the previous colour band combinations). So I think we now have a marking process for individuals which is the optimum.”

IBA REPORT LAUNCHED

Australia’s Important Bird Areas (IBA) project has reached a major milestone with the completion of the report identifying 314 IBAs across the nation.

With funding from Rio Tinto, Birds Australia has been responsible for managing this project over the last three years, aided by input from many community participants, including BOCA members. BOCA is also represented on the IBA Technical Committee.

IBAs have been chosen as being of global significance for bird conservation. Details of each of the Australian IBAs may be found on the IBA section of the Birddata website www.birddata.com.au/iba.vm and a summary report will be available in December.

The IBA project is on-going, providing a focus for monitoring and conservation of Australia’s birdlife. An important aspect of this will be to engage and gain the support of local landholders and communities. BOCA members are encouraged to participate in this next phase, which is the primary reason for identifying the IBA sites.

INSECTRAP CAN KILL BIRDS



BOCA has received several reports of small birds dying as a result of being caught on a glue trap which is being widely sold to attract and kill insects on fruit trees. While some birds are killed, many others are damaged, as evidenced by feathers remaining on traps. This is not surprising as birds would be attracted to insects which are caught on the glue.

The Insectrap (see photo) is a 35cm long plastic column covered with a glue, promoted as being non-toxic, with a 3-4 month lifetime. The package recommends that 2 to 4 traps be hung on each fruit tree, depending on the size of the tree. There is no warning about its potential to capture birds or what to do if a bird is caught.

BOCA strongly opposes the use of glue traps such as these and is pursuing the issue with relevant Government agencies to determine the legality of their distribution and use.