

J.N. Hobbs Medal 2020: Citation - Alan Stuart PhD



Alan Stuart trained as a scientist at the University of Western Australia and gained a PhD in 1979 in organic chemistry. He worked for more than 30 years in industrial research and development, primarily with BHP in Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW).

In an amateur capacity he applied his scientific skills to studying (in particular, though not exclusively) the birds of the Hunter Region in NSW, where there are more than 450 species. He joined the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (as BirdLife Australia was then called) and its special interest group, Australasian Wader Studies Group, about 25 years ago. BirdLife Australia recognises him as one of the volunteers in Australia 'who have created one of Australia's largest biological datasets'.

On the BirdLife Australia website (<https://birdlife.org.au/get-involved/citizen-science/meet-our-citizen-scientists>) Alan explains how he became interested in birds:

My interest in birds was ignited when I moved to the east coast in 1981 - initially I just wanted to put the correct names to the flora and fauna in my new neighbourhood. Once you start looking closely at birds, you get hooked!"

At a personal level, monitoring helps grow my understanding about the birds at specific sites. At a big-picture level, I enjoy contributing to better knowledge about Australian native birds and how to look after them. When I'm not watching the Sydney Swans or with my head in a book, I'm usually thinking about birds. I write poems about them, produce crosswords about them, and write papers about them.

Alan's work has been focused mainly on the Hunter, Port Stephens, Manning and Hastings areas in NSW, and his research and data collection have contributed significantly to the knowledge and conservation of Australian birds. He has written at least 46 articles in journals such as *Stilt*, *Australian Field Ornithology* and *Corella*, as well as

the Hunter Bird Observers Club's (HBOC) peer-reviewed journal, *The Whistler*. He has written reports on seabirds, shorebirds and on the monitoring and study of Rufous Scrub-birds in the Barrington and Gloucester Tops, NSW. He has been generous with his time, presenting talks both locally and at conferences such as the Australasian Ornithological Conference and Australian Shorebirds Conference, and on countless occasions he has promoted birds and the importance of their habitats through local and national media outlets.

Alan joined HBOC in 1984 and it was not long before he began to take a prominent role in Club matters. There is little doubt that he has had a significant influence on the development of HBOC's philosophy which is underpinned by the BirdLife Australia model of leadership and advocacy. This is a model that he believes should be adopted in bird clubs Australia-wide. He actively encourages HBOC members to participate in projects (in particular, BirdLife Australia projects) that benefit birds and their habitat, e.g. Shorebirds 2020, Bittern Project, Woodland Birds for Biodiversity, monitoring of Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), Atlas Project and Birddata. In order to promote the latter, he has conducted several workshops on bird atlassing and on how to use Birddata so that HBOC and its members are now regularly among the top contributors. The methodology used in all of Alan's projects is compatible with BirdLife Australia's Atlas project, and all results are entered into Birddata.

Since 1987, Alan has held senior positions with HBOC: as Treasurer (1988–1996), President (1998–2002) and Vice-President (2005–2006 and 2016–2017). He sat on committees during the intervening years and took on additional roles when required. He was joint Field Studies Co-ordinator from 2011 to 2013 and Field Studies Co-ordinator from then up to the present.

In 1993, Alan initiated the *Hunter Region Annual Bird Report*, which he then edited for 25 years to the end of 2018. The Bird Report has evolved to become arguably the most informative regional account of birdlife in Australia.

He has retired from that post, only to take on co-editorship of HBOC's annual journal, *The Whistler*. He also was actively involved in the initiation process of this most successful journal, with volume 13 now available online.

Alan participated in the NSW Bird Interest Group Network from its beginnings in 1991, and acted as its co-Treasurer for several years. On a lighter note, in 2006, he started the Hunter Region 300/350/400 Club in order to introduce some light-hearted competition into local birdwatching and he is the author of *The Cross-bird* in BirdLife Australia's quarterly magazine *Australian Birdlife*. For some people, participation in such activities is often a starting point for a deeper involvement in avian welfare.

Alan's contribution to Australian ornithology is distinguished by his ability to galvanise a regional bird community to commit to systematic bird study in a sustainable manner by fostering a culture that engages the whole spectrum of the birding community. This is

exemplified by the more than 20 consecutive years of Hunter Shorebird monthly surveys which have involved over 150 participants with results disseminated annually in the HBOC *Annual Bird Reports* and the Shorebirds 2020 database.

Summary of projects initiated by Alan

- Monitoring waterbird populations in the Hunter Estuary monthly since 1999 (co-initiated with others)
- Monitoring waterbird populations in Port Stephens—a boat-based operation—twice a year since 2004
- Monitoring waterbird populations in the Manning Valley since 2008
- Monitoring bird populations in Saltwater National Park since 2011
- Monitoring waterbird populations at Cattai Wetlands since 2011
- Terrestrial bird monitoring on Broughton Island, NSW. The project, studying changes in bird populations after the removal of feral animals, commenced in 2012 and is a collaborative effort between NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service, Broughton Island Conservation Society and HBOC.
- A collaborative study of Grey-tailed Tattlers in Port Stephens with local and Japanese ornithologists. In 2013–2015, Alan went to Japan annually to study this species during its migration passage, with one outcome being to prove that Grey-tailed Tattlers forage at night (contrary to the widely held view that they are strictly diurnal).

- Monitoring Rufous Scrub-birds in the Barrington Tops and Gloucester Tops KBA, which started in 2010 and is ongoing. The work generated by Alan on this species is the contemporary basis of its conservation status. What began as a simple monitoring exercise has led to additional studies, such as investigating the calling behaviour of individual male birds, and in 2018 he instigated a banding/radio-tracking project still in the early stages. With a team of local banders, Alan travelled to Western Australia in 2018 to take part in the Noisy Scrub-bird Recovery Project to gain experience on how to catch Rufous Scrub-birds. To date, two Rufous Scrub-birds have been caught and colour-banded, and already this has added information new to science about this little-known species, which is so vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

For over 30 years Alan has made a valuable contribution to ornithological knowledge through thorough research and documentation. He is a dedicated advocate for birds and their habitat and is a most deserving recipient of the John Hobbs Memorial medal.

Ann Lindsey, Life member, Hunter Bird Observers Club
Robert Stewart, President, Hunter Bird Observers Club