

# 27 years of shorebird surveys in the Hunter Estuary

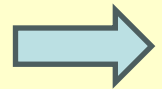
## A community engagement success



Alan Stuart & Ann Lindsey  
Hunter Bird Observers Club  
20 September 2026

# History

- Industrial development pressures around the Hunter Estuary in 1990s
  - Coal loaders, airport, steel mill, ....
- Intermittent periods of counting 1965-1985 had highlighted the estuary's importance for shorebirds
- Realisation that current whole-of-estuary data needed to be collected



Monthly shorebird and waterbird counts initiated in April 1999

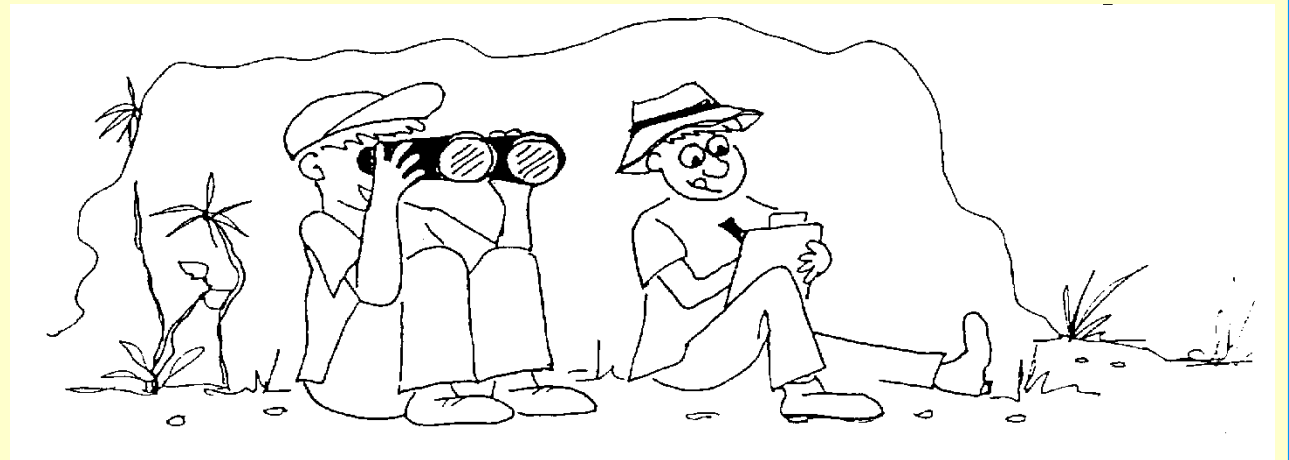


Shorebirds and industry have had to learn to co-exist

# The growing survey effort

- Began with four people (two teams) monitoring the main high tide roost areas
- Additional volunteers recruited (ongoing)
- Third team added in 2000
  - Allowed Kooragang Dykes and Stockton Sandspit to be surveyed simultaneously instead of consecutively
- Rehabilitation projects by NPWS at Tomago and Hexham generated new sites to be monitored

➡ In 2026, seven teams,  
12-18 people each  
month



# Some outcomes

- ~250 individuals have participated
  - Some short-term, many multiple-year
- 327 survey-months (of 329 possible)
  - 2 x winter storms. COVID had minimal impact.
  - Occasional incomplete coverage of the minor sites
- Have inspired monthly surveys at four other shorebird sites
  - Port Stephens (Swan Bay roost site)
  - Lake Macquarie estuary
  - Newcastle Bight (Worimi Conservation Lands)
  - Teralba Lagoon



Godwits, avocets, etc at Stockton Sandspit

# Some more outcomes

- Ongoing technical publications
- Ongoing local media coverage
- Shorebird needs considered in rehabilitation projects (tidal flow restoration) at Ash Island, Tomago and Hexham
- Acceptance by all stakeholders that controlled removal of mangroves is worthwhile
- University of Newcastle projects (PhD, Honours) on shorebird movement, diet, threats, ....



Hexham Swamp, facing west

# What has worked

- Dedicated core group of people to drive the survey effort
- Team leader for each site
  - Consistency of effort/route/timing
- Schedule (dates/times) decided >12 months in advance
- Stakeholder involvement
  - Hunter Local Land Services provided a boat 2007-2025
  - NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service
    - The surveys mainly take place in Hunter Wetlands National Park
    - Intermittent involvement of NPWS staff in surveys
    - Provision of boat (2026 and ongoing)
  - Local industry (NCIG – compensatory habitat)
  - And .... the volunteers



Survey team at Kooragang Dykes

# Volunteers

- Monthly reminder sent to the current pool of volunteers
- Available volunteers are assigned to a team for that month
  - Primary objective is that every site is surveyed
  - Secondary objectives:
    - Consistency of survey effort
    - Training for inexperienced observers
    - Opportunities to experience the variety of sites
- Monthly informal reports by team leaders to Hunterbirding (local email chat group)
- Large-scale celebrations of milestones (the 5-year anniversaries)



Survey team at Tomago

# The wider community

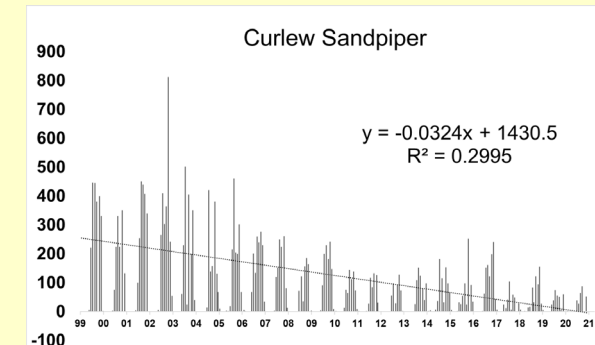
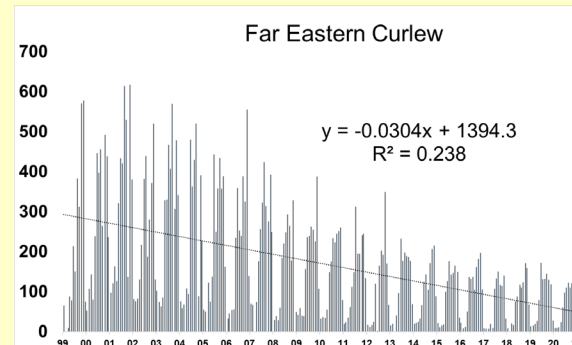
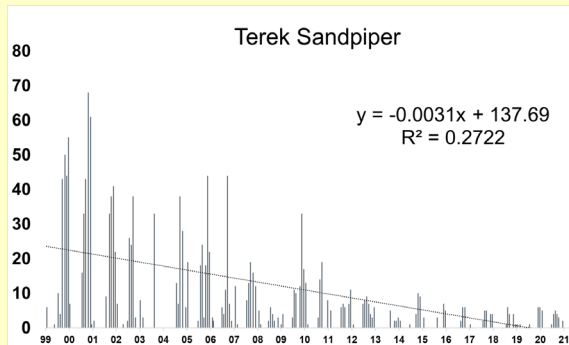
- Occasional media releases
  - Often have led to follow-up interviews
- Open Days e.g. “Meet the Shorebirds”
- Mangrove Clearing Days
- Signage (at Stockton Sandspit and elsewhere)
- Occasional training courses (in shorebird identification)



Part of the group at an Open Day at Stockton Sandspit

# Data

- Cross-checking with teams about potential double-counting due to bird movement
- Logged by the team leaders as Shorebird Surveys in Birdata
- Data exchange with local industry (re compensatory habitat projects)
- Results summarised in annual bird reports and in technical publications
- Detailed site-specific analyses by students from University of Newcastle



# Acknowledgements

- HBOC Management Committee
- NPWS staff
  - In particular, Jo Erskine, Gabby Smith, Boyd Carney
- Hunter Local Land Services staff
  - In particular, Peggy Svoboda
- Support from BirdLife Australia shorebirds team
- The ~250 volunteers

