Newsletter for the Asia Pacific Flyways & Australian Shorebirds 2020 Project

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### No. 49 September 2020

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Red Knot ©Ian Southey

### Editorial

This edition comes to you amid the worse pandemic experienced by humankind which has touched the world population with millions of people infected and a massive loss of life. Covid-19 is also affecting the global economy including that of Australia.

With the environment already low on the list of priorities in Australian by state and territory governments and with little support from the Australian Government, we have seen repeated cuts to funding year after year. This has resulted in the loss of staff and resource funding. Now is the time to look at contributions by community groups such as members of bird clubs etc. Whether it is population monitoring or volunteer work on the ground in areas of most need.

I have started a series of cases by including an article in this issue of Tattler about one such a commitment by the Hunter Bird Observers Club, virtually on my own doorstep, to illustrate how we can help during hard times for our environment and wildlife. In this case threatened migratory shorebirds and their habitats. The article is largely from the 2019 report to the HBOC committee by Tom Clarke. I look forward to hearing of other examples with volunteer groups providing articles from around Australia. Together we can make a difference!

BirdLife Australia's Andrew Hunter explains some of the history of the Ramsar convention and relates this to the Toondah Harbour which is under threat from a massive development project. Some of the most threatened sites for migratory shorebirds are Ramsar sites despite our obligations under this convention. (*P.T.O.*)

Compiled and published by the Australasian Wader Studies Group www.awsg.org.au A Special Interest Group of BirdLife Australia





## Editorial (cont'd)

Ramsar sites are selected as wetlands of international importance, especially as Wildfowl Habitat and may include important habitat attributes for specific species or population of waterbird, fish population, aquatic vegetation etc unique to the site. If any of these change over time due to human influence causing detrimental changes the site may be considered as one that has 'passed its limits of acceptable change' since the date of nomination. Any such change must be informed to the Ramsar Bureau. If deemed necessary, a response strategy may be requested as to how such threats might be addressed by the Ramsar country partner. An example is that of the Kooragang Ramsar Wetland Ramsar site.

Fortunately many members of bird clubs have remained active while exercising and keeping appropriate distancing and regularly getting out to keep and eye on our migratory shorebirds. This has been useful in keeping up with the National Shorebird Monitoring program count data entry. Many in NSW and Qld are out at there local patch every month!

Currently BirdLife Australia Melbourne Office is closed under the Stage 4 lockdown which applies to businesses in metropolitan Melbourne as the state of Victoria continue to battle against surging COVID-19. However, you can contact BLA staff by email or leave a message on the staff members extension. Fortunately the EAAF Partnership office in RoK continues to stay open, with half of the staff rostered on each second day.

The Global Flyway Network working in Australia and China rarely gets a mention despite the incredible amount they do on migratory shorebirds and tracking the migration routes. An introduction and link to their 2020 report is included in this issue of Tattler.

On top of the global effect, I have had my own mini crisis restricting my physical actives for over four months, taking the wind out of my sails and restricting the amount of time I can 'sit' at my computer. Hence a delay in returning Tattler to a quarterly publication (by post to members or as a PDF on our website). I am finally over all of this and almost back to 'normal'.

As I type this newsletter there are moves by the members of the AWSG to revamp our website making more interactive and informative. I hope by the time you read this issue of Tattler you might see some changes!

#### Phil Straw, Editor

*Contributions are welcome and should be sent to: philip.straw@awsg.org.au* 

# *First Lew Young grant awarded in memory of Lew Young*

#### *Successful application for the WWF Dr Lew Young Grant under the Asian Waterbird Conservation Fund (AWCF)*.

On the World Migratory Bird Day 2020, WWF-Hong Kong was pleased to announce that the successful application for the 1st WWF Dr Lew Young Grant is the project "Towards an Informed Conservation Action Plan for Seabirds in the Philippines" by Ms Cynthia Layusa from the Isla Biodiversity Conservation. She said "While the government and non-profit organizations strive to conserve wetlands and associated species, there remains a gap in our research and conservation efforts, and general awareness toward seabirds. To the best of our knowledge, there are also no previous attempts to consolidate local seabird studies and efforts in the Philippines."

In the 1-year project, a seabird knowledgesharing and action planning workshop will be organized to determine potential sites for seabird research and identify and address gaps in research and conservation at the local and national levels. In order to strengthen the skills in seabird identification and survey, a fieldbased training will be held with local groups and volunteers. Education and outreach work such as interviews within the fisherfolk and coastal communities and the distribution of public awareness materials will also be carried out in the selected survey sites.

CEO of WWF-Hong Kong, Mr. Peter Cornthwaite, said, "I would like to express WWF-Hong Kong's gratitude for the support given by the AWCF Committee in the screening process that has led to Cynthia's project being awarded with the Grant to contribute to the work of the Seabird Working Group under the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership. Each time I met Lew he was passionate about involving local communities in conservation so I know that he would be pleased to see that the Grant was going to a most deserving area of research for the Flyway, offering really practical help to those in the field who care so much about saving wetlands and seabirds. This is a great moment and the WWF Dr Lew Young Grant and our other AWCF grants are building a strong constituency for wetland conservation, bringing together people of diverse skills and backgrounds."

Prepared by Fion Cheung, AWCF Secretariat

### Drawing a line in the mud

BirdLife Australia's **Andrew Hunter** reflects the first modern treaty between nations aimed at conserving natural resources —the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands —and how the future of this 49-year-old agreement, and those of the birds it seeks to protect, could rest on whether or not a luxury marina and apartment complex is allowed to destroy a critical part of important migratory shorebird habitat in Australia.

A mountainous spa town on Iran's Caspian Sea, once a favoured holiday spot of the Shah, seems a very, very long way from a subtropical mudflat dotted with mangroves off the coast of Brisbane. But though they couldn't seem more different, what they share are landscapes that support an abundance of migratory birdlife—places for birds to stop awhile to refuel on their boundless travels across countries and continents and hemispheres.

And, like 2,385 other places around the world, Queensland's Moreton Bay also shares another special bond with this small Iranian town. For Moreton Bay, and all other designated wetlands of international importance scattered across the globe, enjoy the protection of the one of the modern world's very first international conservation treaties, signed by 18 nations on 2 February 1971, in this Iranian town of Ramsar, and since ratified by more than 170 other countries. Now, almost 50 years on, the very basis of the Ramsar convention, that of the 'wise-use' of wetlands, which ornithologists and scientists have deemed as the best possible way to conserve, restore and protect the world's wetlands and flyways, is under threat.

Although these two little words seem fairly straightforward, how they are interpreted will decide the fate of one of Australia's most contentious coastal development projects, Toondah Harbour. And the decisions and key events surrounding the Toondah Harbour development will, for better or worse, have ripple effects for global wetland conservation and the future of the Ramsar treaty itself.

### A Convention for wetlands and birds

There are a number of modern international treaties to protect the world's natural environment and biodiversity, but the Ramsar Convention is the only one that was designed to protect a specific ecosystem—wetlands.

This idea for an international treaty to protect wetlands first came about from the concern of ornithologists over the troubling trend of the decreasing populations of migratory waterbirds and the loss of their wetland habitats. In order to halt the declines, they knew it would take strong international cooperation and commitment toward mutual benefits.

So, throughout the 1960s these ornithologists along with national governments and non-government organisations negotiated a draft text for a new international treaty. These negotiations came to a head in February 1971 in Ramsar, with signatories agreeing to a mission to halt the increasing loss and degradation of the world's wetland habitats.

Although Australia was not an official part of that delegation back in 1971 it has none the less played a significant part throughout its history, most notably by being the first Contracting Party in 1974 and listing the world's first Ramsar Wetland of International Importance: the Northern Territory's Cobourg Peninsula, in 1975. Over four decades later and Australia still has a major role to play—when it decides the fate of Toondah Harbour later this year.

Wetlands are still declining, and threats are growing since the Convention was signed in 1971, at the time of writing the number of Ramsar sites has grown to 2,386, a mass covering a total surface area of 253,771,681 hectares, or roughly the area of Western Australia.

Unfortunately, over that same period the worlds' wetlands have declined by 35 per cent. The 2018 Global Wetland Outlook Report states that this decline is at a rate three times greater than the loss of the world's forests and puts over a quarter of wetland species at risk of extinction. The Report found that the key drivers for this decline have been the conversion of habitats (particularly infrastructure development in urban areas, river valleys and coastal areas), extraction activities and the emerging threat of climate change and rising sea-levels. Alarmingly, the remaining wetlands that have not been destroyed are now suffering from pollution, invasive species, unsustainable use and disrupted flow regimes.

Many of the wetland species at risk of extinction include migratory shorebirds that have seen some populations decline by as much as 80 per cent over the last 30 years. Large-scale coastal wetland loss in East Asia from land reclamation and development is one of the biggest contributors to the decline in migratory shorebirds but the cumulative loss and degradation of their coastal habitat all along the East Asian– Australasian Flyway, including Australia, is having an impact.

### Drawing a line in the mud

Although, the Ramsar Convention is not binding—it has no punitive sanctions for violations or mechanisms to hold Contracting Parties accountable to their commitments— Australia has included its obligations to the convention in our key national nature law, the Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act. Ramsar Sites are legislatively protected as a Matter of National Environmental Significance, which requires that any actions that have, or are likely to have, a significant impact require approval from the Minister for the Environment.

Our international obligations and national legislation should stop negative environmental impacts but throughout its 20-year history we have seen the EPBC Act fail to adequately protect and conserve the environment and biodiversity. Nowhere is this more evident than at Toondah Harbour.

#### Toondah Harbour: a test of the strength

Moreton Bay was designated as a Ramsar Site in 1993 and meets all nine Ramsar criteria including supporting over 50,000 waterbirds and over one per cent of the world's population of nine migratory shorebird species. Moreton Bay holds particular significance for the Critically Endangered Eastern Curlew by supporting up to 6.5 per cent of the world's population. We now recognise it as the single most important site for Eastern Curlews in Australia.

This has not stopped the Walker Corporation, one of the largest and wealthiest private development companies in Australia, from proposing to develop part of the wetlands at Toondah Harbour into a mixed use residential and commercial precinct. Since 2015 there have been three separate iterations of Walker Corporation's development plan, with the latest to include 3,600 residential dwellings and a 200-berth marina.

The problem is, that in order for the development to proceed, a significant area of the Moreton Bay Ramsar Site and important feeding mudflats for Eastern Curlew will be permanently destroyed, with impacts affecting wetlands beyond the development footprint. Experts within the federal Department of Environment clearly have issues with the Walker Corporation's plans and have previously advised the Minister for Environment to reject the plan stating that the project will likely "have significant impacts on the ecological character of the Moreton Bay Ramsar wetland" and concluding that "the impacts on the ecological character of the site will be difficult to mitigate and offset." The Minister ignored this expert advice and progressed the development to an environmental assessment, which will allow the Walker Corporation to build its case for destroying the site.

The Ramsar Convention recognises that urban development should be planned and managed in a sustainable way but makes it clear that any further degradation or loss of wetlands as a result of urban development should be avoided. However, there are two mechanisms that allow for the development within a Ramsar Site. First, a Contracting Party can delete or restrict the boundaries of a Ramsar site if it can prove that doing so is in the urgent national interest. This is a very rare occurrence and has generally been used for major military or public infrastructure projects like ports, airports or military bases. It would be very hard to argue that a private development that benefits a limited number of people is in the urgent national interest.

That leaves the only other option—the wise use of wetlands. Generally, the wise use concept has been interpreted as traditional farming and fishing practices like rice farming within the Xe Champhone Ramsar site in Laos. The Convention's current definition of the wise use of wetlands is "the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development." The Walker Corporation has a very large hill to climb in order to make the case that their proposal to destroy parts of the Moreton Bay Ramsar Site and feeding habitat for a Critically Endangered species is the wise use of wetlands and maintains its ecological character.

Toondah Harbour will determine how seriously Australia takes its national and international commitments to biodiversity conservation and will ultimately be the test of the strength of the Ramsar Convention. A private development of this scale, within internationally important wetlands, has never been approved in Australia and is neither in the urgent national interest nor wise use of wetlands.

Indeed, what happens at Toondah Harbour will have global repercussions. Ramsar Sites are designated for a reason and must be protected and conserved using the full scope of local, state and federal environmental law. If the federal Government does not take its international obligations seriously, Australia's reputation, both home and abroad, is at stake.

# Drawing a line in the mud/ Global Flyway Network in Australia

### The world is watching

It was just last year that Australia played a major role in protecting threatened migratory shorebird habitat in China's Yellow Sea through a different international treaty, the World Heritage Convention. The Australian Government delegation played a crucial leading role in securing a positive decision from the World Heritage Committee and this year Australia has the opportunity to continue that leadership.

Will Australia uphold our obligations and reject the inappropriate Toondah Harbour development? Or will it set the dangerous precedent that the wise use of wetlands is permanently destroying them to make way for private developments? We will soon have an answer as the Federal Government will make their decision on this issue in the next 12 months. In the meantime, we need your voice. Together, we can save Toondah.

# *Global Flyway Network in Australia Update*

The Global Flyway Network (GFN) was initiated by Theunis Piersma, professor of Global Flyway Ecology at the University of Groningen, in the Netherlands in 2006. This includes work in the NW Australia and China where its team, carries out extensive studies of migratory shorebirds in Northwest Australia as well as the coasts of China. This includes extensive catching and marking migratory shorebirds, notable with engraved coloured 'leg flags', which identify induvial birds in the field by any observer in the East Asian Australasian Flyway. Over the years members of the GFN, who employ Chris Hassell, in Broome, NW Australia, have spent many thousands of hours scanning extensive tidal mudflats in North West Australia as well the coasts of China. The resultant database includes flagged shorebirds in any of the Flyway countries that pass through these study areas during migration.

The (GFN) is a partnership between researchers worldwide who are devoted to long term usually demographic — work on long distance migrating shorebirds. The partnership aims to build on the strengths of comparative demographic shorebird studies worldwide, with the aim to understand and analyse the factors determining shorebird numbers in a rapidly changing world. In practice it also tries to fill major gaps in coverage of fieldwork of the world's most threatened shorebird flyways.

### Summary of the GFN Report – June 2020

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Global Flyway Network (GFN) researchers from Australia, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom were unable to travel to China. Luckily, our colleague Katherine Leung was able to lead the fieldwork. She had to endure 28 days of quarantine to achieve this. Fourteen days on arriving in Shanghai from Hong Kong and 14 days when moving from Shanghai to Nanpu Development City. GFN thanks her for showing such endurance.

Katherine was ably assisted in the fieldwork by six additional scanners, Mr. Guan Xiangyu, a Beijing bird guide, Miss Gao Chang, a freelance investigator from Beijing and graduate from Beijing Normal University (BNU) under our longtime collaborator Prof. Zhang Zhengwang, Miss Wu Entao, Miss Guo Jia and Miss He Ying, research assistants at Beijing Forestry University, and our close colleague Hebo Peng. We thank them all for their efforts in difficult times. The costs this year were covered by the Center for East Asian-Australasian Flyway Studies (CEAAF) at Beijing Forestry University (BFU) under the leadership of Prof. Lei Guangchun The team was in the field from 4 May to 7 June, 34 days (less than a usual spring field season of 56 days).

The Luannan Coast referred to throughout this report encompasses our study sites shown in Figure 1 and the adjacent salt and aquaculture ponds.

The main findings from this year's fieldwork showed that on the Luannan Coast in 2020, Red Knot Calidris canutus were never present in such large numbers as in 2019. The biggest single count in 2020 was of 20,000 on 24 May. This is in stark contrast to the 47,537 counted on 22 May 2019. The numbers of Red Knot using the Luannan Coast varies a lot from year to year. Relatively large numbers were present in 2014, 2015 and 2018. However, relatively low numbers recorded during 2016 and 2017. Given that food resources usually determine distributions, the benthic food at Luannan and other sites determine the numbers of Red Knot that come to Luannan.

Due to limited time spent at Zuidong, the most used site in our study area for Great Knots Calidris tenuirostris, the highest count there was on 6 May of 7,350. This is considerably lower than the count in 2019 on 8 May of

# Global Flyway Network in Australia



12,971. The count in 2019 was the highest number we have recorded in the eleven years of complete survey periods for this species. So, it is possible that both Red and Great Knots were at Luannan in smaller numbers this year.

We recorded 1,169 marked shorebirds from throughout the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF). Due to the shorter time and relatively inexperienced team this is, as expected, a much lower total than that of previous years. This year, 193 birds were individually recognisable from the GFN colour-banding project in Northwest Australia (NWA). While this is also lower than in years with greater effort, it is a particularly good sample and testament to the hard work of the 2020 team. The totals were dominated, as always, by Red Knot with 189 individuals identified, Great Knot with 3 and Bar- tailed Godwit Limosa lapponica with 1. These results come from 'scanning' - this is systematically searching through feeding or roosting birds using telescopes and looking specifically for flags and colour- bands on bird legs. Each marked bird is recorded, and the records sent to each banding project at the end of the fieldwork season. This season, due to the water levels in the pond habitat being deeper than in all previous years, Red Knots did little feeding there and subsequently spent more time on the mudflats. Re-sighting observations and counts are easier and more productive in terms of recording marked birds

on the mudflats. Despite the shorter study period and subsequently lower numbers, as in previous years, these records reflect the vital importance of the area for Red Knots from NWA and throughout the EAAF.

At high tide, when the mudflats are inundated by the sea, the ponds within the salt works/ aquaculture areas host all the migrant shorebirds, making the area a critical component of the Luannan Coast. For their roosting opportunities alone, the ponds should be included in any conservation initiatives. These ponds are also an important contributing factor to the local economy and jobs. The importance of the vast area of commercial ponds adjacent to the inter-tidal area for shorebirds has been well documented from our work and that of Beijing Normal University (BNU) in previous years. This year the use of ponds by shorebirds was similar to 2019, which had much reduced use than in any previous year. Many species usually utilise the ponds, but all except two of the ponds that were explored had deep water in them consistently throughout the season. The main pond we used for scanning in 2017 to 2019 now has high water levels. This was not a surprise as we had talked in 2019, via our driver Mr. Liu, to a pond manager who had told us this pond would be filled with water for aquaculture. We do not know if the loss of all these ponds as foraging habitat is detrimental to the shorebirds

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fattening up at the Luannan coast to the extent that it deprives them of resources required to put on enough weight for successful migration and breeding. Nevertheless, our observations show that the loss of shallow ponds is depriving birds of foraging opportunities. In 2013, when there were many and varied ponds available to birds, we had the amazing sight of 95,833 mixed shorebird species foraging in a single pond on 16 May. On 29 May that year, we had a count of 34,200 Red Knot foraging in a shallow pond. The deep water provides few foraging opportunities particularly for the small and medium-sized shorebirds.

A table of species recorded in internationally important numbers has been compiled from GFN and BNU studies over the previous 11 northward migration seasons (2010-2020). It is an effective way to give an indication of the immense importance of the Luannan Coast Shorebird Site. In the last six seasons, seventeen species of migratory shorebirds and one migratory tern have been recorded in internationally significant numbers (1% Ramsar criteria). Five species have an absolute minimum of 10% of their entire EAAF population passing through the Luannan Coast site during northward migration (Table 4, main report). Note that these are single peak counts and do not account for turnover rate: if that statistic was applied, the total number of birds assessed using the Luannan Coast during the northward migration season would be much greater.

On the Luannan Coast the direct destruction of the intertidal habitat has slowed during the last nine years. The pressures on the intertidal areas appear to be less severe in terms of direct destruction but are still present with the development of industry and housing areas adjacent to and on previously reclaimed mudflats. There are building projects that are taking place in former pond habitat and mudflat areas reclaimed in recent years. This includes a large steel works that will have a port developed on still existing intertidal flats. Currently, multi-billion-yuan projects are in the planning stages for development within the Luannan Coast area and the future of these critically important intertidal areas remain under threat despite the commencement of management actions at the Luannan Coast by the Luannan County Government.

Global Flyway Network aims to continue conducting research activities and followup analysis to document the futures of four shorebird species (Bar- and Black- tailed Godwit and Red and Great Knot) at their non-breeding sites in NWA and throughout the EAAF, with an emphasis on the Luannan Coast, Bohai Bay. A critical question is the interpretation of the variable use of the Luannan Coast by Red and Great Knots. What does this variability mean? Is it due to changes to, or loss of, habitat elsewhere? Or that the favoured food of Red Knots, Potamocorbula laevis is not in regular or consistent abundance at all sites and Red Knots 'choose' the best sites year on year? Knowing this distinction is critical, but requires local and flyway-wide research efforts, including the continuation of satellite tracking of individual knots.

Read complete GFN 2020 report here http://globalflywaynetwork.com.au/bohai-report-2020/

### A Successful Effort in the Hunter Estuary, NSW

Most environmental management in Australia is the responsibility of state and territory environment agencies. Unfortunately, the environment also has a very low priority for funding in Australia resulting in ever decreasing human and financial resources and consequently a deterioration and loss of critical wetland habitat (including two Ramsar sites). This is largely due to the declining resources allocated to state and territory government environment agencies and the consequent dramatic reduction in staffing levels and funds for on-ground environmental management. Migratory shorebirds have been particularly hard hit, resulting in dramatic declines in populations at many sites around Australia (on top of losses in other parts of the East Asian Australasian Flyway), through habitat degradation and threats from encroaching development and disturbances.

The involvement of community groups and NGOs has been shown to be of great assistance to site managers; in fact it is essential at some key sites where managers and community groups are productively working together. The Hunter River estuary is a good example. An area massively impacted by industrial development in the early 1970s including the loss of a large proportion of pristine wetlands resulted in a large impact on populations of migratory shorebirds.

Restoration and management of the Hunter estuary is the focus of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service with a substantial involvement of the Hunter Bird Observers Club over the past twenty years. Here the two main areas of community volunteer involvement are waterbird population monitoring and on-ground management, such as weed control in key habitats including the feeding and roosting sites of migratory shorebirds. Much of this article is from a progress report to the HBOC Committee by Tom Clarke, the driving force behind the onground work by volunteers from the club.

Community Shorebird Habitat Management in the Hunter Estuary

An example of volunteer shorebird habitat management is the work carried out by the Hunter Bird Observers Club (HBOC), which has carried out long-term monthly bird counts across the Hunter Estuary region. This includes more than 20 years of counting the Hunter Wetlands Nature Reserve and Ramsar Site. During that time members have built up an impressive knowledge base of all the birds found across many sites. These data have provided long-term trends of migratory shorebirds alerting site managers of the threats as well as the reasons behind dramatic declines of some critically endangered species. Knowledge of changes to habitat essential to these birds during the six to seven months they are in Australia, in particular during the lead up to their migration back to their breeding grounds on the other side of the world plays an important role in management decisions.

The Hunter Estuary covers a total area of 14,108 hectares and includes 37 shorebird count areas.



Newsletter for the Asia Pacific Shorebird Network

It is one the most important sites for migratory shorebirds in Australia. Like so many shorebird sites around Australia the Hunter estuary wetlands have been subject to large scale declines in the numbers of migratory shorebirds and their habitats over recent years through loss of habitat, changes to river flows and disturbance.

Since 2003, members of the HBOC have maintained a constant volunteer effort with various restoration works in the Hunter Estuary. These projects all focus on shorebird habitat, chosen for their strategic importance to migratory shorebirds. Many project sites across the estuary are shown in Fig 1.

Extremely important roost sites include Stockton Sandspit, the 'Dykes' rock retaining walls which enclose artificially created 'ponds', including Pond #4, Fullerton Cove Beach, and Smiths and Sandy Islands. These six sites together provide by far the largest shorebird roosting area within NSW. The sites to the west across an area known as Ash Island include the most extensive saltmarsh and tidal lagoons area in NSW which are used as feeding habitat for migratory shorebirds, including the critically endangered Eastern Curlew. These include locally named sites: Milham's Pond, Phoenix Flats, Wader West, Wader Pond and Swan Pond.

The HBOC and the NSW Wader Study Group (subgroup of the AWSG) recognised the importance of the Ash Island saltmarshes as feeding and roosting habitat for many migratory shorebirds. This includes recognising the importance of flooded saltmarsh and tidal lagoons as nocturnal roost sites through nocturnal studies carried out in the Hunter estuary by the HBOC and NSW WSG since 1992. In addition to the value to migratory shorebirds 'coastal saltmarsh communities' are listed as an Endangered Ecological Community under the NSW Threatened Species Act.

Currently the combined project sites cover over 150 hectares of the Hunter Wetlands National Park. Since early 2003 more than 10,000 hours of volunteer effort has been accrued in these endeavours.

### Mangrove Licence

Much of the volunteer work carried out involves removing mangrove seedlings that invade beaches and saltmarsh areas within the sites, destroying their value to waders. To do this, permission from National Parks and Wildlife Service as well as obtaining a NSW DPI Fisheries permit (PN17-379) is required under Part 7 of the Fisheries Management Act 1994. These permits are issued for three-year periods only and the current permit, which allows "harm to marine vegetation associated with wader bird habitat management, Hunter Wetlands National Park" is in force until 30th December 2020.



Figure 2. Removing mangrove seedlings by hand is the most efficient method when working within saltmarsh areas.



Figure 3. The previously felled mature mangroves continue to break down. The expansive openness of the saltmarsh is restored and beckons shorebirds to come and enjoy.

### **Remote Sites**

(Smith Island, Sandy Island, Fullerton Cove Beach and Dyke Pond #4)

These sites have been managed as part of continuation of a Threatened Species Recovery Fund project since June 2018. As a result recruitment of mangrove seedlings in all the remote sites since 2018 has been relatively low and the follow-up sweeps over all beaches and saltmarsh have been easily completed. The majority of these sweeps were conducted across three consecutive days at the end of February that coincided with favourable low tides. All the nominated areas on Smith Island (two beaches plus large saltmarsh), Sandy Island (one beach plus small saltmarsh) and Fullerton Cove Beach were cleared of mangrove seedlings. The effort over the large saltmarsh (15ha) on Smith Island was completed with great efficiency by a team of volunteers from Hunter Local Land Services. Regular monitoring of these sites at high tides continues with kayak access to the island sites and walking access to Fullerton Cove Beach. The beaches on Smith Island and at Fullerton Cove have shown good improvement in occupancy by shorebirds roosting over the high tides. Constant surveillance of the saltmarsh on Smith Island since July 2017 using a fixed camera has recorded numerous periods of activity by wading type birds but as yet no shorebirds have been detected.

### Site Works at Area E

(Milham's Pond, Phoenix Flats, Wader West, Wader Pond and Swan Pond)

The main focus over the Ash Island sites is the treatment of mangrove seedlings. Since all the primary felling of the trees several years ago it is solely the detailed picking of each subsequent season's seedlings that forms the bulk of the work. The combined area of almost 114 hectares was covered this year in the very reasonable time of just under 70 hours. This represents another below average yearly effort and anything under 100 hours is completely sustainable by volunteers.

### Works at Milham's Pond/Phoenix Flats

Four days' work at Milham's Pond and Phoenix Flats in March and April this year was sufficient to complete the required work. Seedlings were not found in any great density and although they were distributed across all areas in greater numbers than the previous year, the level of recruitment was not difficult to manage. Two weeks later, a final inspection-walk back over all the areas indicated that the job was done for another year.



Figure 4. The work at Milham's Pond starts at the highest end of the system. The finish line is far away in the distance.



Figure 5. Twelve months after the primary clearing of mangroves, saltwater couch was barely covering this quadrat.



Figure 6. Saltwater couch has progressed out to an additional 13m beyond the quadrat now.

### **Stockton Sandspit**

This 4ha site is the most visible to the general public and probably one of the most visited. Restoration work at this site takes on several facets but the underlying focus is that of maintaining a shorebird roost. The volunteer effort here over the past twelve months amounted to 246 hours.



Figure 7. The Great Saltmarsh is a feature of Stockton Sandspit.



Figure 8. Dedicated volunteers restoring the marsh on Golden Plover Point.

### Mangroves

Since 2002, when the primary treatment of the invading mangroves was carried out, follow-up seedling removal has taken place. Generally, this activity takes place over a low-tide period and for some time now has not presented much of a challenge at all.

Once mangrove removal has been completed, other weeds have been targeted on Big Island and the Shelly area.



Figure 9. Mostly this year's mangrove seedlings at the Stockton Sandspit beach before removal occurred in a narrow band along. Large numbers of shorebirds move up the beach during the incoming tide.

### Stockton Sandspit Roost

The main focus at Stockton Sandspit (Figures 7 – 10) is its ability to provide a safe place for shorebirds to roost. The Sandspit is a complex of habitats including shallow tidal waters with a central island, surrounding saltmarsh, saltmarsh grassy margins and open shelly sand. All these elements are addressed each year to give choice to the various shorebirds.



Figure 10. Students from TAFE practicing some weeding techniques at Stockton Sandspit.

This combination of these relatively undisturbed habitats creates a near perfect area for a wide variety of migratory shorebirds to roost during diurnal high tides, with separate areas preferred by different species. It is a favourite site for local birdwatchers as well as visitors from afar, due to the ease of observation without disturbing the birds. The tidal lagoon is the central attraction with regular sightings of thousands of Red-necked Avocets and large numbers of Eastern Curlew and Bar-tailed Godwits and smaller groups of a variety of tern species. More careful searching reveals one of the best sites for Red Knot and Black-tailed Godwits, while flocks of Pacific Golden Plover become obvious with careful inspection of the saltmarsh and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and the increasingly rare Curlew Sandpiper prefer smaller wet areas on the saltmarsh.

It is possible to see a whole variety of less common shorebirds as well as leg-flagged shorebirds from many of the migratory flyway countries and breeding sites. Many of these return year after year, whether moving through the Hunter to southern sites and New Zealand or overstaying for six months or more before heading north.

Stockton Sandspit is also a good site to watch shorebirds moving in front of the incoming tide from the nearby tidal flats. These birds continue feeding while pushed up towards the sandspit. Once the tide starts to recede many of the shorebirds follow the tide back out again, feeding on wet, freshly exposed mud.

This year's site management efforts commenced in late May with a sweep for exotic plants (weeds) over the main saltmarsh, roosting area for Pacific Golden Plover, and along the edge of the purposely constructed shallow tidal roosting pool 'The Scrape' where thousands of shorebirds can often be seen.

Weeds treated included buffalo grass, rag weed, marram grass, ice plant, Hebenstretia, saltbush, spike rush, bitou bush, Galenia, telegraph weed and evening primrose. A few late mangrove seedlings that had appeared around the margins of 'The Scrape' were also dealt with. Across six days during the months of June and July, the requisite winter management of the area was successfully completed.

From time to time it becomes obvious that the established native shrubs planted adjacent to the saltmarshes begin to invade the grassy margins. This poses a threat to the shorebird roost as the advancing shrubs reduce the openness of the roost and birds become less comfortable. The need to weed native shrubs and to seriously prune some back was addressed again during August and September with the able help of a group of TAFE students on one occasion and some International Student Volunteers on another.

This work has come from many years studying the behaviour of shorebirds since the early 1980s by the NSW Wader Study Group (mainly members from Sydney and the Hunter region) who carried out catches of large numbers of birds using cannon-nets and an extensive banding and flagging. Management techniques have improved to a fine art by the HBOC over the past 20 years.

Stockton Sandspit attracts birdwatchers from near and far to look at the large flocks of migratory shorebirds, sometimes outshone by Res-Necked Avocets! It is also a good site to see flagged migratory shore birds moving through flagged at any of the countries in the EAA Flyway or even our own nesting birds during their non-breeding season.



Figure 11. At times the site is dominated by Red- necked Avocets!



Figure 12. Victoria flagged Red-Necked Avocet Neil Fifer photo

### The Dykes roost site and Hunter River `North Arm'

'The Dykes' is a river training wall built to constrain the flow of the North Arm of the Hunter River during the industrial development of 'Kooragang Island'. The industrial development stopped short of the training wall which is now another 'managed' roost site for large numbers of migratory shorebirds. The structure started to deteriorate, threatening the security of this important migratory shorebird roost. However, NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service in association with HBOC took on the task of restoring and improving the structure. The site is now in demand by thousands of shorebirds.

One important aspect of the two main roost sites in the North Arm is that if either roost is disturbed by humans or raptors the birds have an alternative place to move to. There appears to be ample space between the two sites if purpose built floating roosts put in place in early 2019 is any indication (Fig 14) as no birds of any description until recently when two tattlers and an egret used one of the roosts briefly.



Figure 13. Just part of the many shorebirds roosting on 'The Dykes' Mick Roderick photo



Figure 14. Floating roost sites are not in demand in the Hunter Estuary Phil Straw photo

#### Acknowledgements

These estuary projects in the Hunter continue to succeed because of the input of many people with a common interest in estuary health and shorebird habitat restoration.

All of the works, planning and implementation are the result of enduring partnerships that provide the organisational structure to make it all happen. The contributions of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Hunter Local Land Services and Hunter Bird Observers Club are ceaseless and very much appreciated.

Many thanks to all those individuals that have volunteered their time and effort in the field and gone home with a feeling of achievement and some sense of the issues confronting our shorebirds. Your efforts are certainly appreciated by those invaluable creatures that require safe roosting opportunities. They include members of Conservation Volunteers Australia and the TAFE students who incorporate the estuary in the practical application of their studies.

Particular acknowledgement is due to Boyd Carney (NPWS) for his constant availability and interest in the estuary. The in-kind service provided by NPWS through his support has proved to be crucial at times.



# AWSG News in brief

### The 2020 - 2022 AWSG Committee

We now have a new AWSG Committee that came into operation on 1 July. Below is the Committee composition including some brief information about the members of the Committee. The Committee will continue to meet quarterly but by Zoom in the current world of COVID 19.

#### AWSG Membership

The Treasurer Birgita Hansen and I have been reviewing the current membership of AWSG and we have found a large number of what appear to be lapsed members. This may be due to AWSG members renewing their membership in line with their membership of BirdLife Australia which may happen over the twelve months of the calendar year. I am checking the situation with the BirdLife Australia membership area and hopefully this is the case. We would be most concerned to lose such a large number of our members.

We would encourage any members who may have forgotten to renew their membership to do so as you are a valued part of our organisation. As a reminder, those members of AWSG, who are not members of BirdLife Australia, should renew their membership on 1 January of each year

#### AWSG NWA2020 Shorebird and Tern Expedition

The AWSG NWA2020 Shorebird and Tern Expedition, conducted in February 2020, was the first one conducted since 1981 without Dr Clive Minton who passed away on 6 November 2019. Clive had contributed his usual enthusiasm and organisational skills to the preparation of the 2020 Expedition and liaison with potential expedition members, local land holders and indigenous groups. From this groundwork the expedition leaders were able to pick up the threads and continue with the core research objectives. Satellite tracking was put on hold for this year as Clive was instrumental in obtaining funding for this project and there was insufficient time available to obtain the necessary funding to order the transmitters. Project objectives were met, and the expeditioners are thanked for taking initiative and 'stepping up' in Clive's absence to make the expedition a great success. Our thanks are also due to the Queensland Wader Studies Group and the WA Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions for their support for the Expedition. It was regrettable that the Chinese participants who were to take part in the Expedition were unable to do so due to COVID 19 and the travel restrictions imposed. A full report on the Expedition will be published in the next Stilt.

#### *Migrations of the Oriental Pratincole* (*by Grace Maglio and Amanda Lilleyman*)

The Oriental Pratincole (Glareola maldivarum) is the most numerous migratory shorebird on the Australian non-breeding grounds. However, there is an almost complete lack of knowledge of this species, not only in terms of movements within Australia but also there was very limited information about migration routes and breeding sites. Over the last two years, the AWSG has led world-first research on the tracking of this species. The team have discovered the migration paths of the individuals, including one bird that crossed over from the East Asian-Australasian Flyway to the Central Asian Flyway.

From our tracking, we know that Oriental Pratincole spend less than 12 weeks in Australia for the non-breeding season. This differs from many other migratory shorebirds in the flyway and we are yet to understand the drivers that influence the movement of these birds. Where are the millions of pratincoles (there were 2.88 million counted in February 2004) that were once counted along Eighty-mile Beach? We have many more questions about these birds that we would like to answer, but to do this, we need to track more individuals so we can confirm the migratory movements of this species. We are planning the next phase of the project to involve observational studies of nesting birds and a comparison of threats that birds face across the expansive breeding grounds where Oriental Pratincole are found.

The Oriental Pratincole project will receive funding of \$13,000 through a very generous donation from artists engaged in the Overwintering Project which aims to raise awareness for migratory shorebirds and their habitat through artistic works. The funds come from the sale of original prints by artists from all around Australia and some from New Zealand that have been sold at exhibitions in 2019. We are so grateful for the support that the artists have provided to the project by donating their works and to galleries for foregoing commissions to allow for the generous donation. Special thanks are due to Kate Gorringe-Smith who coordinated the Overwintering Project.

### Shorebird Monitoring around Australia

The Shorebirds 2020 project (S2020) was a joint initiative of AWSG and Birds Australia established in 2007. In 1981 AWSG initiated counts of shorebirds at selected sites and has been a major driver for shorebird counting since then. The program has now come to an end and has been replaced by the National Shorebird Monitoring Program. We have a vast network of around 1600 volunteers who have played a crucial role in and contributed significantly to monitoring of shorebirds since inception of the project and their monitoring has been seamlessly transitioned into the National Shorebird Monitoring program. National Shorebird Monitoring continues to be a critical undertaking, providing unique nationwide information on the state of Australia's shorebirds from 520 shorebird areas.

BirdLife and AWSG are aiming to (re)appoint state coordinators in all Australian states and territories in 2020 to install a decentralised network to coordinate count efforts, close survey gaps and to address the demographic problem of an aging counter population by increased recruitment efforts through events and workshops. Several key publications have been revised and reprinted, such as the Shorebird ID Booklet and a new Wetland Bird ID Booklet (refer to http://birdlife.org. au/sb-monitoring and download access to booklets here http://birdlife.org.au/projects/ shorebirds-2020/counter-resources).

#### National Directory of Important Habitat for Migratory Shorebirds

The 1400-page Directory was reviewed by the Australian states and territories and completed in April 2020 by BirdLife Australia staff. The Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment is now proceeding to prepare publication of the Directory in file format as an online resource. It will constitute a key resource for researchers, conservation groups and decision-makers throughout Australia and the flyway, identifying nationally and internationally important migratory shorebird areas around the continent on the basis of the most up-todate count data from the National Shorebird Monitoring and all other sources accessible. Once available you may like to browse the Directory to be informed about the nationally and internationally important migratory shorebird areas in your area(s).

#### Site Action Plans

Together with the relevant stakeholders, BirdLife Australia has finalised drafts of eleven Site Action Plans for priority internationally and nationally significant habitat areas for migratory shorebirds in South Australia. These action plans have been produced in collaboration with land managers, stakeholders and communities to identify threats and key management needs for migratory shorebirds at specific sites. Site Action Plans are now becoming a significant tool in BirdLife Australia's Migratory Shorebird Program portfolio to facilitate concrete change for migratory shorebirds at specific sites.

#### Update on the work of the Global Flyway Network

The Global Flyway Network had a highly successful 2019 spring/northward migration season in Bohai Bay and AWSG continued to support this collaborative arrangement with A\$5,000. A total of 38,644 re-sightings were recorded and of these 10,359 were from the AWSG work in NWA. 6,057 from the Victorian Wader Studies Group (VWSG) project with much smaller numbers from Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia and Northern Territory. The highest number from overseas projects was New Zealand with 5,248. Unsurprisingly GFN-Australia were not in Bohai in 2020.

Dry season catching coordinated by Chris Hassell continued in the collaborative project between GFN and AWSG. In addition to the data collection the project has a huge outreach introducing a few hundred people to shorebird research including many children who write wonderful accounts of their experiences. http:// globalflywaynetwork.com.au/latest-news/

#### AWSG Scientific Committee

The AWSG Scientific Committee, chaired by Danny Rogers, maintained its scientific program in North-western Australia, with banding expeditions in February 2019 and 2020 and continuation of the ongoing collaboration with the Global Flyways Network on studies of survival of north-western Australian Shorebirds. The MYSMA (Monitoring Yellow Sea Migrants in Australia) project continued the series of largescale repeatable shorebird counts that have been carried out by the AWSG in two of Australia's premier shorebird sites (Roebuck Bay and Eighty Mile Beach) since 2004; MYSMA surveys were carried in June and December 2019. A major report on results from the MYSMA program was completed, reviewing trends in north-western Australia since 2004 and recommending future directions for the monitoring program. The report will be published later this year.

Collaborations with universities and other research organisations led to several publications making use of AWSG data. The Scientific Committee continued its basic work of overseeing requests for AWSG data. A key activity of the Committee over the next few months is completing a review of the shorebird banding program in northwestern Australia.

### Banding and Leg-flagging Databases

With financial support from the Wettenhall Small Grants program awarded to the VWSG and logistic support from Deakin University, Aaron Spence and Marcel Klaassen have started transferring all VWSG and AWSG banding databases to a webbased platform. This move, including transferring both the metal-band and the flag-sighting databases, has enabled VWSG and AWSG to better interrogate and present over 40 years of data. Although there is still some flag-sighting data to be transferred and the functionality of the platform requires further development, already now various people have started working with the online data portal. This has been a major project run by Marcel and we are delighted that the invaluable data that have been collected over such a long time is now providing a valuable tool for many purposes.

This has for instance resulted in regular species summaries depicting recruitment and age profiles and the whereabouts of flagged individuals. Also, the potential for other overviews to be generated and readily shared with the group and the wider public through the internet has now been improved dramatically. More details will be available for all to read soon.

### AWSG Publications

The editor of Tattler Phil Straw on philip.straw@ awsg.org.au is currently preparing the next edition of Tattler. Phil would welcome any items that members consider would be appropriate to include in Tattler so please contact Phil with your ideas. The 2019 issue of Stilt is in the last stages of finalisation and we are hoping it will be available in the next couple of months.

We would like to welcome Imogen Warren as the new AWSG Stilt Editor. Imogen lives in the Manawatu Ramsar site in New Zealand, has a keen interest in waders and also in photography (imogenwarrenphotography.net). She is involved with Birds NZ and comes to the AWSG with lots of experience in editing and proof reading. Her experience will bring a fresh approach to Stilt, and the committee and Stilt editorial board are delighted that she has taken on the role. We look forward to a very productive working relationship with her.

We would also like to assure authors awaiting their PDF proofs for manuscripts submitted to Stilt last year that the issue is in its final production stages and should be available in the next few weeks. We apologise to those authors for the extended delay in receiving their published manuscripts.

### Meeting of the Partners (MOP) of the EAAFP

The 11th Meeting of the Partners of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) is scheduled to be held in Brisbane from 14 to 19 March 2021, co-hosted by the Australian Government and BirdLife Australia. However, in view of the COVID19 restrictions on travels, the future timing of the Conference will be assessed later in the year.

#### Australasian Shorebird Conference (ASC)

The next ASC, to be hosted by the QWSG and the AWSG, is also scheduled for March 2021 in Brisbane following the Meeting of the Partners of the EAAFP. A joint Committee formed to plan the ASC is progressing the arrangements for the Conference and its program and more information about the program, speakers and other arrangements for the Conference will be provided at a later date.

#### Feedback from members

Finally, the AWSG Chair, Alison Russell French would like to encourage members to raise any issues or items that they would like the Committee to consider and you can do this by letting me know via her email address (alisonrf@ iinet.net.au). The AWSG Committe which comes into be is as follows:

ee – 2020-2022	Joris Driessen	Committee Member and Flagging
ittee for 2020-22		Database Officer
being on I July 2020	Maureen Christie	Committee Member, representative of Friends of Shorebirds SE South
Position		Australia
Chair and interim Secretary, AWSG representative to the EAAFP	Grace Maglio	Committee Member and actively involved in shorebird field activities
Vice Chair and Treasurer, National Coordinator of the Latham's Snipe project	Chris Hassell	Committee Member, GFN Representative and co-leader of the MYSMA project.
EAA Flyway Liaison Officer, Editor of Tattler newsletter and consultant on shorebirds	Robert Bush	Committee Member representing QWSG
	Roz Jessop	Committee Member lead on the NW WA Expedition and VWSG
Chair Scientific Committee including overseeing of data requests, co-leader of the MYSMA project, active in migratory	Amanda Lilleyman	Committee Member, AWSG Communications Officer.
shorebird research Committee Member, AWSG Conservation Officer, actively involved in shorebird field activities, and liaison with BirdLife Australia	Milly Formby	Committee Member, pilot and storyteller responsible for Wing Threads Flight around Australia to raise awareness about migratory shorebirds
Committee Member – Scientific advice and data management.	Ken Gosdeii	co-opted Member, advisor on EAAFP Shorebird WG and active in shorebird tracking techniques
Committee Member; Former national Migratory Shorebird Program Manager. AWSG representative on the Migratory Shorebird CAP		and field activities. Former AWSG Committee Chair and member.

Nomination

Russell-French

Birgita Hansen

Phil Straw

Danny Rogers

Steve Klose

Marcel Klaassen

Steering Committee

Dan Weller

Alison

# Myanmar Ramsar site to protect endangered shorebirds

Until recently, few conservationists knew about the Gulf of Mottama and the secrets hidden within its complex coastline. Its location in southern Myanmar is, like many parts of the country, rugged and difficult to access. However, in the early 2010s, everything changed when surveys lead by BACA (BirdLife in Myanmar) and members of the EAAFP Spoonbilled Sandpiper Task Force revealed more than 200 Spoon-billed Sandpipers Calidris pygmaea overwintering there – fifty percent of the world's population. This makes the Gulf of Mottama the region's single most important site for the Critically Endangered shorebird.

Alongside the affectionately titled "Spoonie", the Gulf boasts some of the largest congregations of shorebirds in Southeast Asia, with over 90,000 birds overwintering here annually. These include significant numbers of imperilled species such as the Eurasian Curlew Numenius arquata and Bar-tailed Godwit Limosa Lapponica (both Near Threatened), and the Great Knot Calidris tenuirostris (Endangered).

The Gulf of Mottama is a vast wetland of great diversity. It sits near the mouths of two of Myanmar's most important rivers: the Sittaung, which drains from the hills to the north, and the mighty Salween, which spills into the Gulf from the east at the town of Mawlamyine. On the eastern fringe, near the village of Thein Ngu, are the forested hills of Kelatha. The coastline between Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, and Mawlamyine contains some of the leastdisturbed coastal mudflats and salt marshes in Southeast Asia.

Quenched daily by a tidal bore sweeping up from the Andaman Sea, the Gulf's wetlands are extremely dynamic, with mud islands rising and vanishing in as little as a month. At low tide, the vast mudflats protrude for kilometres out to sea, dotted with thousands of shorebirds including large flocks of curlews, godwits and more.

Armed with this knowledge, BANCA and their collaborators went straight to work to secure the protection of this precious landscape.

BANCA staff worked closely with local people, who were found to be hunting shorebirds in substantial numbers, putting the Spoonbilled Sandpiper and other declining species at risk. By offering seed funding for assets such as livestock, building materials and fishing boats, they empowered local people to explore alternative livelihoods, weaning them off the need to hunt wild birds. BANCA also worked closely with the local government and village leaders to involve them in the site's protection, forming Local Conservation Groups of enthusiastic community members.

Through dedicated advocacy from BANCA, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Task Force and allied NGOs, in 2017 the Myanmar Government declared 40,000 ha of the eastern side of the Gulf of Mottama as a Ramsar site, increasing the momentum for more conservation activity in the region.

The establishment of the eastern Gulf as a Ramsar Site was not only a major breakthrough, but also provided the impetus for the less-surveyed western site of the Gulf to be considered for conservation. After another two years of consultation with local stakeholders, early this year the Myanmar Government finalised the extension of the Gulf of Mottama Ramsar Site, quadrupling the area to 161,030 hectares, and extending in into the Bago and Yangon regions.

The extension of the Gulf of Mottama Ramsar site is a major step forward in wetland conservation in Myanmar and Southeast Asia as a whole. It protects a vast area of coastline from harmful development, while providing a framework for stronger conservation action and engagement with local communities. The gulf is now one of the largest Ramsar sites in Southeast Asia, a region where there are still large gaps in wetland conservation. Because the gulf's western coast is one of the least-surveyed areas in the region, it has bought more time for conservationists to gain a better understanding of how shorebirds are distributed, and how to engage townspeople as effectively as possible. BANCA's work to conserve the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is also earning dividends for other species, not to mention wetlands in general. Local fisheries are now better managed, and other threatened shorebirds benefit from action to save "Spoonie", thus protecting one of the finest coastal landscapes for migratory waterbirds in all of Southeast Asia. Most of all, work to conserve the Gulf of Mottama will secure the vital ecosystem services such as clean water, climate regulation and flood prevention - that Myanmar's coastal communities will rely on for generations to come.

With high numbers of waders carrying flags at the present time it is essential that maximum effort is put into searching for flagged birds. Large numbers of sightings from a particular site or area, far from being more boring sightings, add more to the value of the flagging program than just one or a few sightings.

For example it is has now been possible to use flag sightings to show differing arrival dates and median migration dates of different populations of the same species from different parts of Australia, through Asia. This is only possible with very large numbers of sightings.

Recording the number of birds searched to yield one flag sighting will also help in determining the proportion of different populations migrating through an area and also may give an indication of how correct the population estimates are.

The flagging program can be used to answer all sorts of long-standing questions about movements of waders. To what extent is South Australia used as a stopover site for waders migrating to and from S.E. Australia? To what extent do southern Australian waders stop on the north coasts of Australia on northward migration, or do they overfly them? What is the entrance point on the Queensland coast for Bar-tailed Godwits on southward migration after their assumed direct flight from Alaska? What is the role of the island arc route though Indonesia as opposed to the direct non-stop migration route to the Yellow Sea? To what extent do waders relocate their non-breeding areas, in subsequent seasons and do some species relocate to the inland Australia when conditions are suitable?

There are dozens of such questions which we now have the potential to answer. The flagging program is potentially a very powerful tool in helping us to understand wader movements and populations, and so give solid scientific evidence in assisting in the formation of conservation programs.

Anybody, anywhere, can help in this program. Please look for leg flags. The more that are seen, the greater the value. Also records of the absence of flagged birds, together with the number of birds search can be of value.

The old Leg Flag Report Form has been removed from the AWSG Website. You can now send any flag sightings direct to the database operator at flagging@awsg.org.au including:

- Species
- Date of observation
- Observer name
- Location name and coordinates (lat/long)
- Flag colours
- Flag engraving (if any)

Photos can be sent with the above details as these are a great aid in identifying individual birds.

Alternatively, if you are likely to regularly send in multiple sightings, please get in touch to request a spreadsheet template for data entry.

#### Please Note:

Please do not report orange flag sightings in Victoria in the area from Corner Inlet westwards to Port Phillip Bay, or yellow flag sightings in NW Australia from Port Hedland Saltworks, 80 Mile Beach or Roebuck Bay. These birds have been banded locally.



Great Knot © Nigel Jackett

# Third annual ANSTO schools Shorebirds Competition goes National

### Background

ANSTO is one of Australia's premiere scientific research organisations committed to environmental research to understand the health of ecosystems and community education. In 2018 ANSTO held its first Shorebirds Competition for primary school students in Years 3 to 6.

The competition aimed to raise awareness of the plight of shorebirds in Botany Bay and local habitats that are important for shorebirds and other organisms.

It supported the initiative taken by the Sutherland Shire Council in promoting shorebirds along their recently constructed shared pathway and well needed purpose-built shorebird roosting island in Woolooware Bay, on the southern shore of Botany Bay.

The competition also supported and coincided with an exhibition by 8 local artists at Hazelhurst Arts Centre entitled "The Overwintering Project: Bound for Botany Bay" that ran from 8 to 18 September.

Phil Straw, vice chair of the Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG) was invited to open this event with a presentation on migratory shorebirds in the East Asian Australasian Flyway. He spoke about the threats to these birds during their arduous migration between the Arctic tundra of Siberia and Alaska breeding grounds, and Australia and New Zealand, where the birds spend up to seven months of the year during their non-breeding season.

Due to the highly favourable response received from the community and schools in 2018, the Shorebirds Competition was run again in 2019, and expanded that year to include greater Sydney and Melbourne metropolitan areas.

#### Shorebirds Competition 2020

The Shorebirds Competition 2020 opened on 24 March. This year, students from all regions across Australia are now invited to participate. In addition, students can now participate from home at a time when many schools may be closed in the months ahead during the coronavirus pandemic. Students are required to learn about shorebirds and the threats to their habitats and then create a public awareness poster for a threatened shorebird in Australia. They may choose either a migratory or resident species.

With shorebirds as the focus, the competition highlights contemporary environmental issues and interconnections across different geographical scales. It provides an opportunity for learning in different subject areas: science, environmental sustainability, geography, literacy and visual art.

For teachers, the activity can be incorporated into class lessons to provide valuable learning outcomes that link to the Australian Curriculum, and sample lesson plans are provided for this. There are great prizes to the value of more than \$4000, that include education resources for winning schools and gift cards for winning students.

The Education Team at ANSTO is keen to connect with many children and communities across Australia and help spread awareness of threatened shorebirds. For expressions of interest or further information, please contact competition@ansto.gov

It is with pleasure that the AWSG endorse this effort to improve awareness of shorebirds and their habitats.

Key dates and further information Competition closes: Friday 14th August 2020 Winners announced: World Shorebirds Day, 6 September 2020

For full information about participating and entry details go to:

https://www.ansto.gov.au/education/primary/ competitions/shorebirds-competition-2020

