

BirdLife Northern Queensland Convenor's Report for 2015

On behalf of your committee, it is my pleasure to give you the report of the activities completed by BirdLife Northern Queensland branch during 2015.

As we started off the year by drafting a strategic plan, with three main goals, I'll use those to structure our highlights.

First, we wanted to grow our membership, and particularly reach out to younger generations. Our member numbers this year grew by 20%, and we now have more than 250 members from all over northern Queensland, even as national membership topped 12,000. About 5% of our members are either students or members of the Sticky Beak group for those under 12 years. With the recent start of monthly Sticky Beak outings, coordinated by BirdLife staff members Golo Maurer and Leann Reaney, we look forward to growing these numbers even more.

Second, we wanted to increase our member-driven projects, based on our members' expertise and wants. So to determine what these are, under the leadership of Sam Willis, we developed a members' survey. This was completed by about 20% of our members. Top of the results was to have more local-based activities, so people do not have to travel too far to participate. In response to this finding, we have decided to trial three separate area coordinators, to develop a program of activities including outings, workshops and presentations in the Cairns and Daintree area, Cassowary Coast, and the Tablelands. We will look to formalise this with election of new committee positions to take on the roles of the three area coordinators. The feedback from the survey was that members wanted to be involved in bird observing, surveys, developing skills and educational events. These will be incorporated into the area programmes, and tomorrow sees our first workshop for the year on how to do systematic bird surveys.

Members also wanted to see a voluntary directory with contact details, so that members could directly contact each other. This is now being compiled and I remind members to let the committee know if you want to be included in this directory, for distribution to members only.

Throughout 2015, we had regular monthly meetings which included a range of topics. Environmental changes including climate change impacts on seabirds, bowerbirds and fire regimes on grasswrens, as well as research and conservation efforts on shorebirds in the Southeast Asian fly-way, Lovely Fairy-wrens, and New Zealand birds. We were also treated to virtual birding experiences in the Daintree, Brazil, Kimberleys, and the Port Douglas Wildlife Habitat.

We had activities to celebrate the national events of Wave the Waders Good-bye, Great Aussie Bird Count, and the Challenge Count. Major camp-outs included Julatten, Cooktown, Georgetown and Karumba, Artemis and Lakefield National Park, and Yungaburra, as well as birding activities at Michelmas Cay, Daintree River, Warina Lakes, Cattana Wetlands, and Mission Beach. Birding for Beginner courses were held in Cairns and Innisfail, as well as shorebird identification. These activities were coordinated by Murray Hunt and Doug Herrington, and they deserve very special thanks from us all.

Our third goal from our strategic plan is to take concerted action on our top conservation priorities. Our priorities here are our Important Bird Areas. The Buckley River, Boodgamulla National Park and Wollogorang IBAs are all declared for the Carpentarian Grasswren. Based on data collected in previous surveys, a case has been made to the national authorities for the species to be declared Vulnerable, with a supporting paper published in *Pacific Conservation Biology*.

A survey by members in 2014 established that the current recognised boundaries to distribution of the Kalkadoon Grasswren are reasonably accurate. A paper has been submitted to *Australian Field*

Ornithology making the case for Kalkadoons to be declared a Restricted Range species. This enhances the importance of the Buckley River IBA because it is shared with the Carpentarian Grasswren. A survey is planned for May 2016 to establish whether both species have recovered since the fires of 2011 and 2012, and the drought that followed.

Our data base on the bowerbirds (Golden and Tooth-billed) in the Wet Tropics Important Bird Area is growing slowly. Dominic Hogan has been the most active recorder. We hope to get Townsville members to participate in the next breeding season.

The Atherton Tablelands IBA is declared for the Sarus Crane. Monitoring has been carried out by the annual crane count. The Crane numbers appear to be stable but may be increasing to the south of the IBA, and we will consider extending our future monitoring efforts to document any changes. All of these efforts on our IBAs are coordinated by Graham Harrington, who deserves special thanks for his leadership.

We again conducted Torresian Imperial-Pigeon counts at Mission Beach and at other sites along the coast as far north as Elim Beach north of Cooktown down to our traditional sites around Mission Beach. This year's counts indicated very high numbers including record highs at Low Isles and Weary Bay. We also financially supported the Thorsborne Trust to produce a DVD entitled the "Coming of the White Birds", which documents the extraordinary efforts made to protect this species.

We responded to some more "reactive" efforts, brought to our attention by you our members. These included engagement with Cairns City Council over sand dumping at the Cairns esplanade and submission on the Barron River off-leash dog area. We provided inputs to the Federal government's feral cat threat abatement plan, and sent letters of concern about wide-scale vegetation clearing at Olivevale and Violetvale stations on Cape York. We continue to be an active member of the Cassowary recovery team, attended the World Cassowary Day, provided input to the Threatened Species Commissioner on our 20 most threatened species. Both Peter Valentine and Graham Harrington deserve our special thanks for their efforts on these.

In achieving what we have, we work closely with several partners in our region. This past year, these included Friends of Ninney Rise, the Thoreborne Trust, several indigenous ranger groups, the Northern Gulf NRM group and Cairns City Council.

There were more concerns we could and should have responded to and several important missed opportunities. As a volunteer group, we are dependent upon what our members are prepared to lead and support through active participation. I cannot stress enough the importance of you, our members, especially those of you who can see a real need, understand what can be achieved, and then actually act to get it done – to be a champion for the rest of us. Our achievements are due to the leadership shown by committee and other active members.

This year we lose three of our founding BirdLife Northern Queensland committee members – Doug Herrington as Activities Coordinator, Murray Hunt as Meetings Coordinator and Secretary, Ian Northcott as Treasurer. We all have benefited from their tireless efforts, so we should all thank them.

In summary – we grew, fought with council, made some friends, didn't spend much money, counted lots of TIPs and some other birds, and wandered around our wonderful northern Queensland. So the BirdLife Northern Queensland committee would like to thank you, our members, for making this such a successful year – and we all look forward to this coming year's events. Let's make them memorable!