

To most Australians the beach is a holiday destination where they can walk, swim, surf or just relax. They probably never think of our beaches as complex ecosystems that provide critical habitat to a range of species, in particular, beach-nesting birds such as the Hooded Plover. Not so the 439 remarkable people who volunteered this summer for BirdLife Australia's Beach-nesting Birds Project. For they are...

THE PLOVER LOVERS

By Cara Schultz





Andrea Dennett and John Murray, Bellarine Peninsula, Victoria

An ocean beach. Nesting Hooded Plovers. Fifteen hundred pairs of runners' feet pounding towards them. Not a recipe for a happy outcome. Yet this was exactly the scenario faced by John Murray and Andrea Dennett as they confronted the possibility that the three pairs of Hooded Plovers that they and other volunteers had been monitoring in the lead up to Christmas would be directly in the path of the Ocean Grove Surf Lifesaving Club's annual fundraising event, the 'Rip to River Classic'.

Andrea, who is a long term resident of Barwon Heads (the Victorian coastal community made famous by the TV series *SeaChange*), is the Beach-nesting Birds Project Volunteer Coordinator for the Bellarine region. Her interest in Hooded Plovers was sparked by seeing the signs on the beach access tracks that would list how many birds were left in the State. She noticed over the years that the number was going down

Left: When the temperature rises and people come out onto the beaches to play, life gets tough for Hooded Plovers. Here, a nesting Hoodie swelters through a 35 degree day on the Mornington Peninsula. Photo by Glenn Ehmke

and after finding out a little more became enchanted by these "quite plucky, very courageous" birds.

John, a self-described "born again surfer", became involved after seeing Grainne Maguire give a talk about Hoodies at a local conservation forum. John has become extremely knowledgeable about the birds—both their behaviour and the individual birds that inhabit his local beaches. His passion comes through whenever he speaks about them. "Hooded Plovers are obviously struggling," John says, "They're nesting right on the beach when this tide of humanity is pouring into their zone. Without the support of not just us as volunteers but as a whole community, we're going to lose these birds."

"Here we have a threatened species on our doorstep that we can actually do something about," Andrea adds emphatically, "They need a hand, and it's not that hard."

Listening to their story about the 'Rip to River', it actually seems anything but easy. For the 2011 event, held just after Christmas when the beaches are at their busiest, the Lifesaving Club approached the Beach-nesting Birds Project to ask about what needed to be done to protect the breeding Hoodies; an indication, Andrea says, that shows that the Project's "message is getting out there and people are more attuned to what is going on."

By the day of the event there was a two-week-old chick with its parents at Point Lonsdale (right near the starting line of the race), and two nests with eggs along Collendina Beach. All sorts of horror scenarios were playing through John and Andrea's minds with the biggest concern being that the flightless Point Lonsdale chick might be down on the wet sand, feeding or cooling off, when the 3,000 feet came a-trampling.

About 15 volunteers rallied to the cause with half assembling at the starting line to protect the Point Lonsdale chick and the

Bottom left: Andrea Dennett and John Murray on Collendina Beach near Point Lonsdale, site of their successful defence of Hooded Plover families during the 'Rip to River Classic'. Photo by Sean Dooley

rest guarding the other two nests. The race was run at low tide meaning that the nests themselves were probably safe, given that the birds chose sites higher up the beach, above the high tide zone. Signs were placed 150 metres either side of the nest and photographers and drink station attendants (who in previous years had set up in front of nests) were asked not to use these zones as it would have kept the adult birds off the nest, exposing the eggs to the risks of predation or literally cooking on the hot sand.

Luckily it was not an overly warm morning and the tide was really low, meaning the runners kept to the wet sand away from the nests, and the chick staying on the upper beach, beyond the galumphing hordes.

The success of the day was a public relations coup for the Point Lonsdale birds and the chick had people continually monitoring it until the day it fledged. John's records over the past six years show that on this stretch of coast only four chicks have survived to fledging from around a hundred eggs laid, so this was a real triumph. Sadly, the other two nests were washed away in a tidal surge during storms the day after the fun-run. Both pairs have since made further nesting attempts and at the time of writing one pair have a chick on the beach and the other have eggs ready to hatch.

It can be a heartbreaking and frustrating existence being a Hooded Plover volunteer; in trying to help these birds they have to put up with a lot of ignorance and the occasional bout of aggression from beachgoers. But on the day *Australian Birdlife* visited, one couple bailed up Andrea and John to ask about the fate of the Point Lonsdale chick. They said that they walked on the beach every day and had a keen interest in the chick's progress. When Andrea was able to tell them it had survived the woman responded, "It's good to have a success after all that watching."

You couldn't wipe the smile off John and Andrea's faces.



Above, from left: Self-confessed Hooded Plover fanatic, Emma Stephens. Photo by Grainne Maguire

Bird-bander extraordinaire Steve Johnson with a tiny chick on the Bass Coast of Victoria. Photo by Grainne Maguire



Emma Stephens, Fleurieu Peninsula, South Australia

Getting to call the beach her office is just one of the perks of the job for Emma Stephens, the coordinator of Hooded Plover projects on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula. A self-confessed Hooded Plover "obsessive" since she completed her honours thesis on the species during university, Emma has been heavily involved with these plucky little beach-dwellers ever since, including a stint as a volunteer monitoring two sites and coordinating 15 volunteers across 18 beaches after she finished her degree.

In her current role as the Coast, Estuary and Marine Officer for the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board, Emma looks after 20 coastal sites around the metropolitan coastline of Adelaide, working on pest animal and weed control, biodiversity planning, revegetation—and of course working with communities and volunteers to best look after the local Hoody population.

It has already been an outstanding year for Hooded Plover on the Fleurieu Peninsula, with 12 successful fledglings, including five chicks that survived on busy southern metro beaches. Emma says that a lot of this success is due to the hard work of the 30 volunteers who collect data, install fences and signs and love to spread the word about the plight of the Hooded Plover to beachgoers.

The assistance and support provided by local Councils and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources also helps the program tick along efficiently.

Emma, along with Wendy White from the Normanville Natural Resources Centre, has been running local Dogs' Breakfasts and kids' activity days to raise the profile of the plight of the plovers. Everyone who attends is anxious for news on Hoodie nests. "As well as organising summer activities we keep the beach signs up-to-date, so that we can let the community know if the nest fails or if the chicks hatch or disappear. I find that lots of people are fascinated by the birds' fortunes and start encouraging their friends and families to do things like leashing their dogs", Emma says.

For Emma, helping the Hooded Plover is more than just a job. She says, "I like that we can support the Hoodies in a practical sense—through management, monitoring and keeping the community aware and informed. But it's especially great when we open people's eyes and get them asking questions like, 'what do they eat?'". She also loves watching the birds, learning their distraction techniques and discovering and identifying a nest, "you can go out to the beach and watch their lives happening in front of you—it's just incredible."

Steve Johnson, Bass Coast, Victoria

Former policeman and long-time Wonthaggi local, Steve Johnson, has gone from bagging hoods to banding Hoodies in his role as the Coordinator of the Bass Coast Friends of the Hooded Plover. Living and working in the South Gippsland area for most of his life, Steve had always known about the local Hooded Plovers, but it wasn't until he learnt these quirky little birds were a Vulnerable species in 2006 that he decided to get involved in their conservation.

Like most of the Hoodie volunteers, Steve has encountered lots of different behaviour when out and about along the coast. He reckons that there is still a lot of ignorance about the bird's plight on our coastal beaches although most beach-goers, particularly families and older people, are interested and sympathetic toward the bird and are glad volunteers are looking after them. "Unfortunately, many beach visitors including dog walkers, vehicle owners and horse riders are in their own world when they visit the beach and don't consider it a habitat for a small bird", he says.

Steve's two saddest moments on the beach have been when he saw that a child's footprint had crushed a pair of Hoodie eggs at a nest site at Harmers Haven, and when he watched a bird lose both feet over a period of weeks after getting tangled in a fishing line. He is proud though, of helping the Bass Coast Hoodies achieve 18 and 20 fledglings over the last two seasons and personally leg-banding and flagging 16 adult Hooded Plover and 19 chicks during his first Banding Permit season of 2010-11.

Walking along the beautiful beach at Cape Paterson, with the waves crashing onto the sand next to him, Steve says his favourite time to watch Hoodies is during their breeding season. He reckons that "there is a purpose in all their behaviour that relates to their goal of successfully rearing a fledgling (or three) if lucky. They are such dedicated and determined parents who try so hard against increasing odds of predation and habitat disturbance by beach visitors. I love their clever adaptability, cunning and enormous commitment as parents."



Jane Cooper, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia

Described by those in the know as "a champion of a lady, intelligent and courageous", Jane Cooper, Volunteer Coordinator of the West Coast Wetland Action Group, is not afraid to say what she thinks when it comes to beach-nesting bird conservation.

Refusing to be silenced by government agencies who avoid making any changes to tackle vehicles or dogs on beaches out of fear of "upsetting the community", Jane successfully managed the 'Scoping the Shoreline' project. This massive undertaking involved a five-year shorebird data-gathering scheme which engaged six coastal communities, 51 volunteers and nine agency staff to monitor 46 different sites around the peninsula.

Though there is still a long way to go to change some beach-goers attitudes and behaviour, Jane says her project's findings are now beginning to make an impact on the coastal management plans of both local and state government agencies—particularly

in regards to how people access beaches (South Australians can still legally drive along shorelines, causing some big problems for beach-nesting birds).

Yet life for this Hoodie volunteer wasn't always so busy. Jane recalls, "way back in the 1960s when I first started birding we didn't have to search for [Hooded Plovers]; they were always there. We took them for granted really." The geographical isolation that protected the Hoodies in this area for so long was lost in the early 1990s, when small coastal communities embraced tourism, coastal development, commercial fisheries and aquaculture to ensure their own survival.

Out on one of the wild west-coast ocean beaches of the Eyre Peninsula, Jane reflects on the amazing resilience of the Hooded Plovers in the face of so many dangers and talks about her most enjoyable moments with the little birds. "I love the early mornings when the day is calm and the ocean is turquoise, the beach is washed clean from last night's high tide and mum and dad and the two chicks are feeding at the water's edge, blissfully unaware of my presence..."

Top: Jane Cooper holds a Ruddy Turnstone during a banding workshop at Streaky Bay, SA. Photo by Christine Taylor

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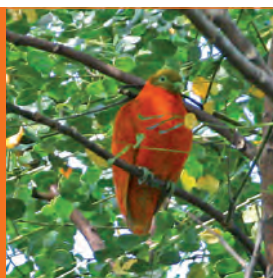
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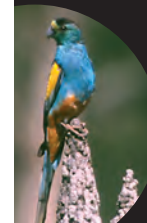
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THE PLOVER LOVERS

Mike Bodsworth, Great Ocean Road, Victoria

Working as a coastal land manager along one of the busiest lengths of coastline in Victoria does not necessarily leave much time for caring for local Hoodies, but Mike Bodsworth and the Great Ocean Road Coastal Committee (GORCC) are obviously doing a good job—Hooded Plovers have set up territories on three additional beaches managed by the committee in recent times.

Mike sees the beautiful but fragile Hoodie chicks, as “the ultimate little battlers”, inexorably caught between their breeding habits and our beach-loving lifestyles. He says that “seeing pairs try and try again, year after year, when so often their breeding attempts end in failure, is incredibly moving. The fact that they sometimes succeed in rearing and fledging chicks in coastal areas during the busiest times of year seems almost miraculous.”

With the odds stacked against the little birds, GORCC do their best with limited resources to seek out the best ways to protect them. GORCC workers who check beach car-park rubbish bins are also trained to monitor the

birds; the committee raises extra-large fences (often with ringlock), around nests; and they have worked with the Surf Coast Shire to ban dogs at Point Roadknight so that this area could become a refuge for the birds. Mike now helps coordinate the volunteers who monitor this important site.

The varying attitudes of beach-goers to Hoodies are something Mike deals with every day. “Most are totally focused on their beach-going and don’t spare a thought for Hoodies or the natural environment. Many have some awareness of Hoodies and are happy to try to improve their chances of breeding. Some don’t believe they exist at all and see the signs and dog regulations as rampant bureaucracy or an excuse to impose dog regulations and curtail recreational freedom. Some see Hoodies and other shorebirds as great playthings for their dogs”, he says.

Although Mike declares that working with Hoodies can sometimes be pretty depressing because breeding efforts so often end in failure, on the rare occasions when he knows that “chicks have grown up enough to be able to fly and ‘leave home’” it is incredibly rewarding.

Band on the runners

One of the most exciting recent developments for the Beach-nesting Birds Project team has been the results gathered from the recent banding of Hooded Plovers. It had been about 12 years since Hooded Plovers were banded in Victoria (with the exception of Phillip Island) by Mike Weston and when the BNB project began in 2006, only a handful of Mike’s banded birds remained. Instead of the colour band or flag combinations on the lower legs, it was decided to use an orange engraved leg flag on the upper leg as a less intrusive marking system for a wading bird.

There are now 110 Hoodies with engraved flags. The BNB project recaptured six of Mike’s banded birds and their histories are fascinating. The oldest, an adult caught at Wonthaggi (‘LU’) is now at least 16 years old (it was originally captured as a breeding adult at Cape Paterson) and has spent its whole life on various beaches within West Gippsland. One bird, ‘KE’, was originally captured as a juvenile at Breamlea in 1996, then travelled east to Portsea and west to Point Addis over the next few years before returning to nest at Breamlea from 2002 onward, and is one of the most successful breeders in Victoria! In their early years, many birds have been shown to move long distances. For instance, ‘HC’, a March 2011 fledgling from Portsea, was spotted in early June to late July at Point Roadknight in a wintering flock and then on September 2 was spotted on a home visit to Portsea (a typical twenty-something returning home for a stint) only to be seen by a volunteer at Apollo Bay on October 12.

As banding activities expand in the far reaches of Victoria and on the Fleurieu, more secrets of the fascinating travels and lives of these little birds are likely to be uncovered.



Above: Working on one of the busiest stretches of coast in Victoria, Mike Bodsworth still finds time to coordinate Hooded Plover volunteers. Photo by Mike Bodsworth