

TEAM OYSTERCATCHER NEWSLETTER, No. 3, September, 2020



Australian Pied Oystercatchers roosting at Bird Island, Murray Estuary (photo: Keith Jones)

This Newsletter summarises the activities of Team Oystercatcher volunteers for 2019/20 in the 3 South Australian regions (SE Fleurieu, Samphire and NE Kangaroo Island) and compares these results with those of previous years since 2011/12. There are 6 sections to this newsletter. Finally, a 2019/20 report card on trends in Oystercatcher counts and human activities for the 3 regions since 2011/12 is attached as an appendix.

- Summary of seasonal and annual trends in abundance, human activities in the SE Fleurieu, Southern Samphire and NE Kangaroo island regions);
- Sightings of banded (flagged) Pied Oystercatchers in the 3 regions;
- Monitoring in other areas of South Australia (Coorong Lagoon, Coffin Bay, sthn Yorke Peninsula)
- Foundation for South Australian Shorebirds;
- New publications on Oystercatchers in South Australia;
- Appendix A: 2019/20 Report card for SA Oystercatchers.

Section 1. Summary of seasonal and annual trends in abundances of OYCs and human activities. (Detailed counts are provided in Appendix A)

SE Fleurieu. Monthly monitoring at all 10 sites continued throughout this year between Middleton Point and the Murray Estuary (see Newsletter No. 2 for locations of each site). The surveyed region encompasses two different habitats, the Ocean Beach and the Estuary to the River Murray. 2019/20 was the 9th consecutive monitoring year. Numbers of roosting **Pied Oystercatchers** (POCs) in the Murray Estuary in

Autumn/Winter were higher for this year compared with those in 2018/19. Since 2014/25 there has been an overall increase in the estuary. In contrast, numbers on the Ocean Beach (Middleton – Murray Mouth) continued to decline in 2019/20, now the lowest since monitoring began in 2011/12. This is highlighted by a contraction of their spatial distribution to the eastern part of the Goolwa Beach at the Barrage and Beacon 19 walkways to the beach, where non-breeding and adolescent birds are noted during the breeding season (September – November). Numbers of **Sooty Oystercatchers** (SOCs) have steadily risen over the monitoring years, both along the Ocean Beach as well as the Estuary, with their numbers being consistently higher on the Ocean Beach.

Numbers of beach and dog walkers, ORVs and Pipi gatherers show large inter-annual variation with relatively lower counts for all three activities in 2014/15 and '16/17. This suggests a common factor in determining their numbers (weather?). Seasonally, highest numbers for all 3 parameters occurred in the summer school and Easter holidays and during the recreational Pipi gathering season (November – May).

Southern Samphire. A total of 4 years of monitoring the Southern Samphire (Semaphore South, Port River and St. Kilda beach) have resulted in downward trends for both species since the start of monitoring in 2016/17. This has been due to a significant shift in their distributions since March, 2018 from the central Port River to St. Kilda and possibly beyond. (see Appendix A). Numbers of beach walkers mainly at Semaphore have steadily increased, and in the last 2 years, numbers of bait diggers, who mainly operated in the central Port River, had decreased. It is not known whether the drop in numbers of bait diggers is linked to the shift in the Oystercatchers from this same area.



**Sooty Oystercatcher at St. Kilda Beach using boulders to break open cockles.
(September, 2020) (Photo: Keith Jones)**

NE Kangaroo Island. Consistent monitoring of the Oystercatchers at the 4 areas on the NE KI coast has now been in place since 2015/16. The areas are the Bay of Shoals, Nepean Bay, Pelican Lagoon and Island Beach (see Newsletter No 2 for locations of these sites). When all sites are combined, upward trends in counts for both species are seen, with numbers of **POCs** being the highest in 2019/20. The Bay of Shoals and Island Beach sites are where highest counts occur, with the trend in numbers at the Bay of Shoals more consistent (Appendix A). The counts of **POCs** at Pelican Lagoon and Nepean Bay Conservation Park show similar inter-annual variations, both experiencing a lower count in 2017/18, then rising in the last 2 years. Highest counts for **SOCS** occurs at the Bay of Shoals and there has been a consistent inter-annual variation in counts at the Bay of Shoals and Island Beach.

Breeding success for **POCs** continued to be monitored during the 2019 breeding season at Island Beach by Dave Potter and Jean Turner, and results will be reported at a later date. Peter Hastwell reported breeding success of **POCs** at his Nepean Bay Conservation Park site was low this last year due to the predation of eggs by Rosenberg's Goannas.

This last year, volunteers have seen **POCs** foraging in grassed areas adjacent to the NE coast of KI, at a number of sites including Reeves Point, Swan Crossing and in a field adjacent to the Minpoil Road at Nepean Bay/Redbanks. This relatively uncommon event for **POCs** has previously been reported for Kangaroo Island and even more rarely on the SA mainland (Jones et al, 2018).

Section 2. Sightings of banded/flagged Pied Oystercatchers in the 3 regions.

During 2019/20, the high value of banding programs to understanding the recruitment areas and longevity of Pied Oystercatchers continued to be demonstrated with several observations in all 3 regions.

In the Fleurieu region, in June, 2020, Bob Green reported a white and green plastic banded **POC** at Bird Island (Murray Estuary). This is the 3rd report for this bird in the Murray Estuary since 2012. It is believed to have been banded in Port Phillip Bay earlier than 2007, suggesting that the bird was at least 13 years of age.

On the northern Samphire coast, in October, 2019, Mary-Ann Van Trigt observed **POC S3** foraging amongst beach wrack at Thompson Beach, NE Gulf St. Vincent. The bird had been flagged 5 years previously in 2014 in the same area.

On Kangaroo Island, 2 flagged **POCs** were reported. Firstly, **POC L6** was observed at Reeves Point, Bay of Shoals by Dave Potter and Jean Turner in October, 2019. This bird had been flagged by Friends of SE Shorebirds (FOSSE) and Victorian Wader Studies Group (VWSG) at Picininie Ponds, east of Port Macdonnell in January 2018 as a recently fledged bird. In June, 2020, John Hodgson reported **POC LV** flagged **POC** at Brownlow Beach, Western Cove. This bird had previously been reported twice before, since 2015 on KI, once at Reeves Point and then at Cape Rouge by Dave Potter and Jean Turner.

The bird had been originally flagged at Corner Inlet, eastern Victoria and is now believed to be 12 years of age.

Section 3. Results of monitoring Oystercatchers in 2019/20 in other areas of SA.

Coorong Lagoon. The Coorong area of South Australia is a nationally important area for Oystercatchers (Taylor et al, 2014) as well as for other resident and migratory shorebirds. For POCs, more than 1 % of its global population is found in this area (Taylor et al, 2014). The Birdlife Australia National Shorebirds Team carries out winter and summer counts of wetland and shorebirds for the Coorong Lagoon. In winter 2019 and summer 2020, surveys were again done. Preliminary results are reported here. In the period May – August, 2019, a total of 161 POCs and 30 SOC were reported within the lagoon. These counts represent more than 16 % and 9 % of POCs and SOC, respectively, for the whole of South Australia (Ferenczi & Weller, 2019).

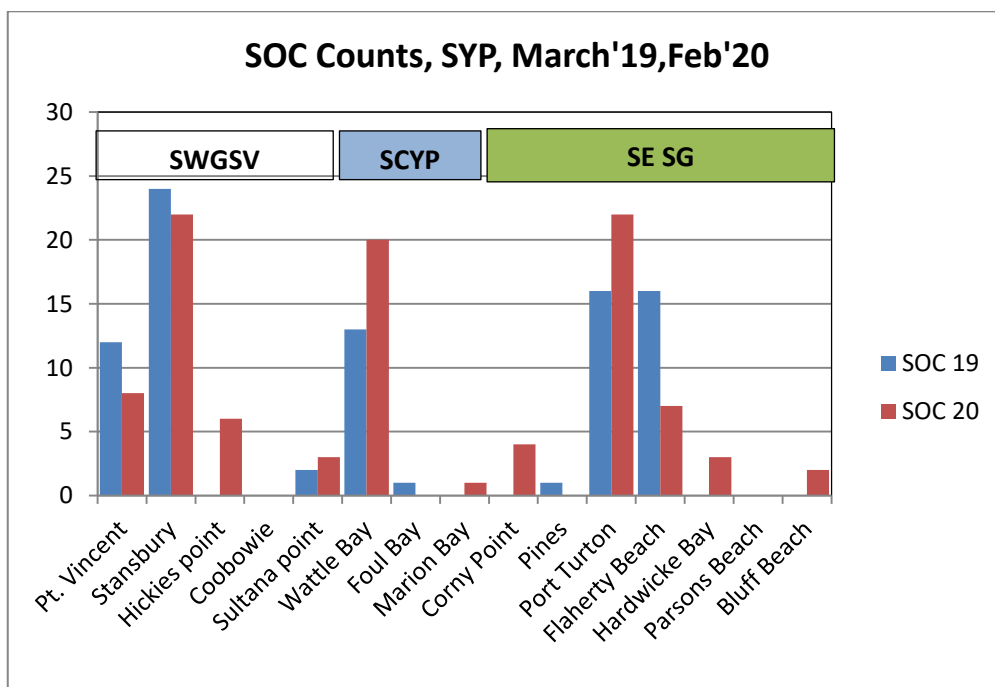
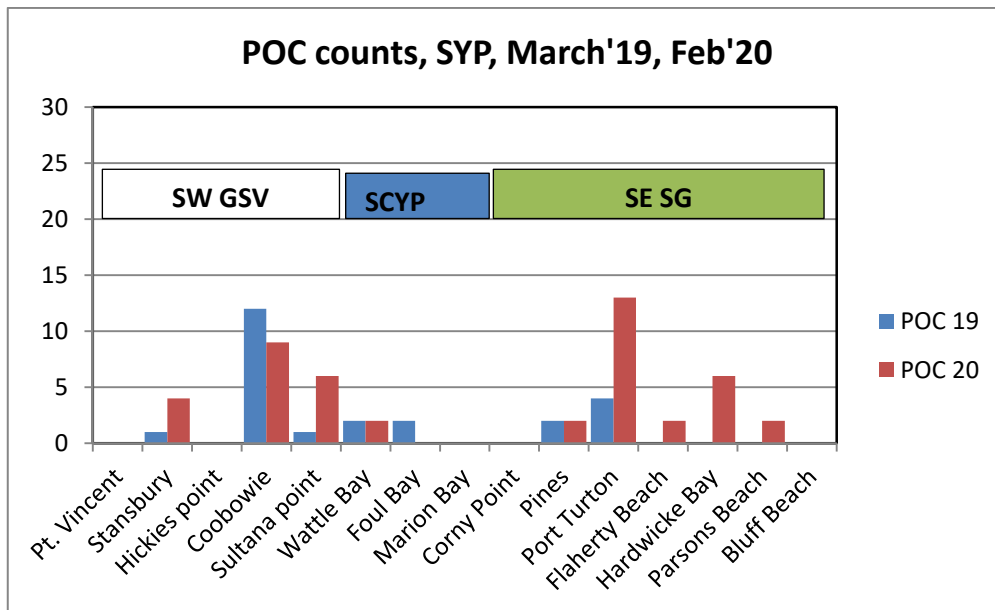
The summer 2020 (Jan 31, Feb 1st) survey resulted in a total of 216 POCs and 5 SOC throughout the Lagoon (Birdlife Australia, preliminary data). Highest counts of POCs (160) were made in the Northern Lagoon, between Pelican Point and Parnka Point, and secondly, 56 in the Murray Estuary (Pelican Point to the Goolwa Barrage). Interestingly, counts of similar magnitude were made at the same sites in the Murray Estuary as those done by Team Oystercatcher in January, 2020 (56 Birdlife Survey, 31 Team Oystercatcher survey). No POCs were seen in the Southern Lagoon.

Of the 5 SOC observed in the summer survey by Birdlife Australia, 3 were reported in the Southern Lagoon, just south of Parnka Point, and 2 in the Murray Estuary.

Coffin Bay. As part of the Shorebirds 2000 monitoring program, and since 2011, Doug Clarke has been monitoring numbers of **POCs** at Long Beach, Coffin Bay. The results of his work are reported in the Summer 2019 edition of The Birder magazine (Clarke, 2019). Allowing for some fluctuations, numbers of these shorebirds have steadily declined from 267 in February, 2012 to 164 in February, 2019. Doug believes the decline has largely been due to the damage by ORVs which a) damage the vegetation on the adjacent sand dunes (where POCs nest), and b) compressing the sand in upper tidal areas of the beach, making cockles, an important part of the diet of the POCs, more vulnerable. BirdsSA has strongly supported Doug's concerns and have made a submission to the recent Parliamentary Enquiry into ORVs to increase the protection of these habitats.

Southern Yorke Peninsula. In March, 2019 and February, 2020, the coast of southern Yorke Peninsula (south of Port Vincent (GSV) to Bluff Beach (Spencer Gulf)) was monitored for **POCs** and **SOCS** (Charts 1 & 2, resp.). Surveys in the 2 years showed similar counts at each site for both species. Overall, numbers of SOC were higher than those for POCs at most sites. This may have been due to the extensive limestone low profile inter-tidal reefs extending around the SYP coast, a preferable habitat for SOC.

Relatively high numbers of POCs were observed at sites of mostly sand/mud substrate occurred (eg Coobowie Bay, Point Turton).



Charts 1 & 2: Summer counts of POC (1) and SOC (2) in 2019 & 2020, for Southern Yorke Peninsula.

Section 4. Foundation for South Australian Shorebirds.

The Foundation for South Australian Shorebirds has recently been formed to financially support researchers, citizen scientists, coastal community groups and coastal managers in furthering our understanding about the conservation status of resident and migratory shorebirds in this state. Grants of up to \$5,000 will be available to successful applicants. Both our resident species of Oystercatcher are included, as well as Red-capped Plover and the endangered Hooded Plover are candidate species. The migratory shorebirds include the endangered ones (Eastern Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Great and Red Knot and the Curlew Sandpiper).

Potential projects suitable for funding include:

- Shorebird population ecology of resident shorebirds, such as breeding success;
- The role of shorebirds in the trophic ecology of SA's coastal habitats;
- Localised movement ecology of resident or migratory shorebirds;
- Activities by coastal community groups assisting in the conservation of shorebirds;
- Travel scholarships to students or key speakers to shorebird conferences;
- Writers, artists or media presenters to depict aspects of the life cycles of shorebirds to the public.

Calls for applications will be made in February each year, and all applicants will be notified of the results in May. A web-site for the Foundation is currently being developed. Those interested in applying can contact the Chair of the R& D Committee of the Foundation, Keith Jones at mob: (+61) 0439 295 990, email: docjones@bigpond.net.au.

Section 5. Recent publications on Oystercatchers in South Australia in 2019/20 and other publications referred to in this Newsletter.

Clarke, D. (2019) Long Beach, Coffin Bay and Pied Oystercatchers. The Birder Magazine, No. 252, Summer, 2019. p. 14 – 5.

Ferenczi, M. & Weller, D. (2019) National Shorebird Monitoring. Coorong Winter Count, 2019. Data Extract. Birdlife Australia Report, September, 2019, 9 pp.

Jones, G.K., Potter, D. & Evans, K. (2018) Observations on Australian Pied Oystercatchers foraging in grasslands and watered recreational areas in South Australia. Stilt. Vol. 72, 33 – 35.

Rogers, C. (2019) A white Red-necked Stint, *Calidris ruficollis* in Dry Creek Saltfields on 22 March 2016 and a very pied Australian Pied Oystercatcher, *Haematopus longirostris* at Kingston, SE on 6 August 2018. South Australian Ornithologist Vol. 44, parts 1 & 2, Nov, 2019, p. 57 – 9.

Taylor, I.R., Newman, M., Park, P., Hansen, B., Minton, C.T.D., Harrison, A. & Jessop, R. (2014) Conservation Status of Australian Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*. *International Wader Studies* 20, 116 – 128.

Acknowledgments.

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