

TEAM OYSTERCATCHER NEWSLETTER No. 9. September, 2023



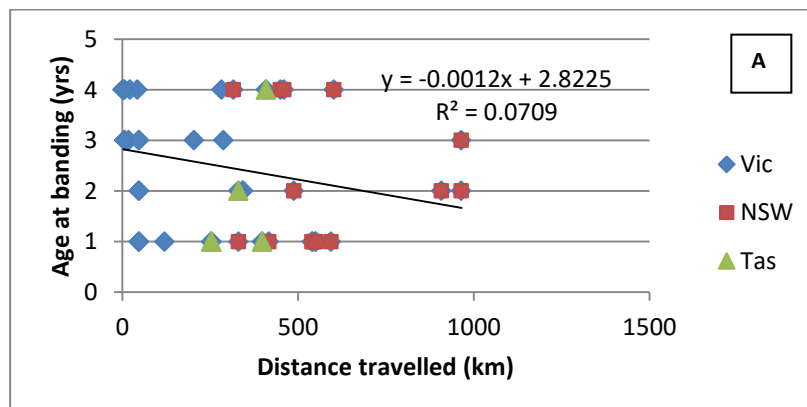
In this, our September, 2023 edition, as usual, we focus on the reports on voluntary monitoring activities in all our regions. Additionally, we discuss the recent results of the Victorian Wader Study Group's (VWSG) banding program on Pied Oystercatchers in Victoria. Their results will guide us in future Oystercatcher banding programs in this State. Finally, we have summaries of the results of a recently completed grant from the SA Shorebirds Foundation and a future project.

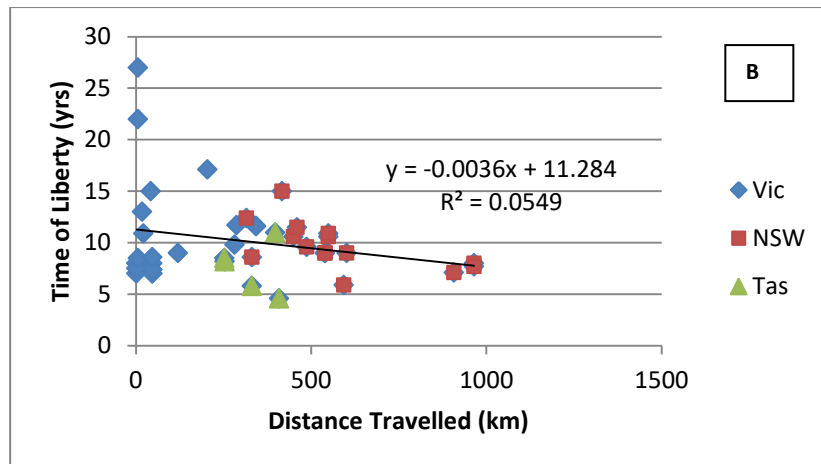
Recent results from Pied Oystercatchers banded in Victoria – age at banding, distance travelled and times of liberty of banded birds.

The VWSG has banded / flagged almost 5,400 Pied Oystercatchers since the late 1970's, and their reported re-sightings / recaptures have been regularly summarised in their VWSG bulletins. Over the years, birds have been caught either by noose traps or canon nets predominantly at Corner Inlet, Stockyard Point and Rhyll in Westernport in Victoria. The results for the last 2 years (2021/22 – 2022/23) are summarised in Table 1 and Figs 1A and 1B.

Table 1: Numbers of Pied Oystercatchers banded in Victoria and resighted in Victoria and other states in 2021/22 – 2022/23 with average distances moved (km), Age-at-banding and time of liberty (yrs).

State resighted	No. banded Birds re-sighted in 2021 - 23	Mean Distance travelled (km)	Mean Age at banding (yrs)	Mean time at Liberty (yrs)
Victoria	21	93.7	2.9	11.2
New South Wales	15	578.5	2.1	9.7
Tasmania	5	329	1.8	7.6
South Australia	1	427	2	21.9





Figs 1 A & B: Scatter plots of relationships between a) age-at-banding and distance travelled, and b) time at liberty and distances travelled by Pied Oystercatchers banded in Victoria, for re-sighted birds reported in 2021 – 2023.

Locations of re-sightings. In Victoria, re-sightings were made along several estuaries and beaches from eastern (Mallacoota) to the western (Port Fairy) part of the State. Naturally, mean distance travelled was the lowest of all States (Table 1). Throughout the NSW coast, flagged birds were sighted in the south at Quarry Beach 316 km from its banding site, to the Manning River estuary (965 km) in the north. The mean distance was 579 km for all NSW locations. In Tasmania, sightings occurred on both the north-western coast (Sisters Beach & Rocky Cape NP) and down the east coast at St. Helens and Point Bagot, Great Oyster Bay (mean distance for Tas: 329 km). A single banded bird was re-sighted in South Australia at port MacDonnell, 417 km to the west of where it was banded 21 yrs previously at Stockyard Point, Westernport.

Age at banding. Most birds were juveniles (1 – 3 yrs of age) when banded (mean ages 1.8 in Tas, 2 in SA, 2.1 in NSW and 2.9 in Victoria.) There was a tendency for younger banded birds to travel greater distances, but this was not significant.

Time at Liberty. The greatest variation in time at liberty was seen in Victoria, ranging from 6 to 27 yrs, with a relatively large proportion of these birds re-sighted close to where they had been banded (< 50 km). There was a slight, but non-significant tendency for birds with shorter liberty times to have travelled greater distances.

Summary. This long-term VWSG banding program has revealed Pied Oystercatchers to be relatively long-lived (at least 30 years of age), confirming results from other banding programs. There is a slight tendency for younger banded birds (1 & 2 yr olds) to recruit further from their rearing areas than older banded birds. In Victoria, where they were reared, the birds either occupy territories near-by, or recruit to sites in other eastern states.

I'm grateful to the VWSG, especially Ila Marks and Mem Smith, for providing the resighting data in the VWSG Bulletins 45 & 46, respectively for the past 2 years. A review of all re-sighting data since the 1970's would assist in testing the hypotheses outlined in this Newsletter.

South-east South Australia.

During the Pied Oystercatcher nesting season of 2021, Friends of Shorebirds SE (FOSSE) reported 11 chicks and 2 fledged birds. Nesting adults were reported at 3 sites; Green Point, near Port MacDonnell, Black Rock (Nene Valley west) (see Fig. 2) and on the beach at Canunda National Park. Three chicks from these sites were banded.



Fig. 2. Adult Pied Oystercatcher (banded Black R 25) with two dependent chicks, one banded in the 2021 breeding season at Black Rock, Nene Valley west. Photo: Sarah Campbell.

In the 2022 season, a nesting pair of POCs was observed at Donovan’s Drain near Port MacDonnell, and a Sooty Oystercatcher nesting on a rock stack at Gerloff Bay (VWSG Bulletin No. 46).

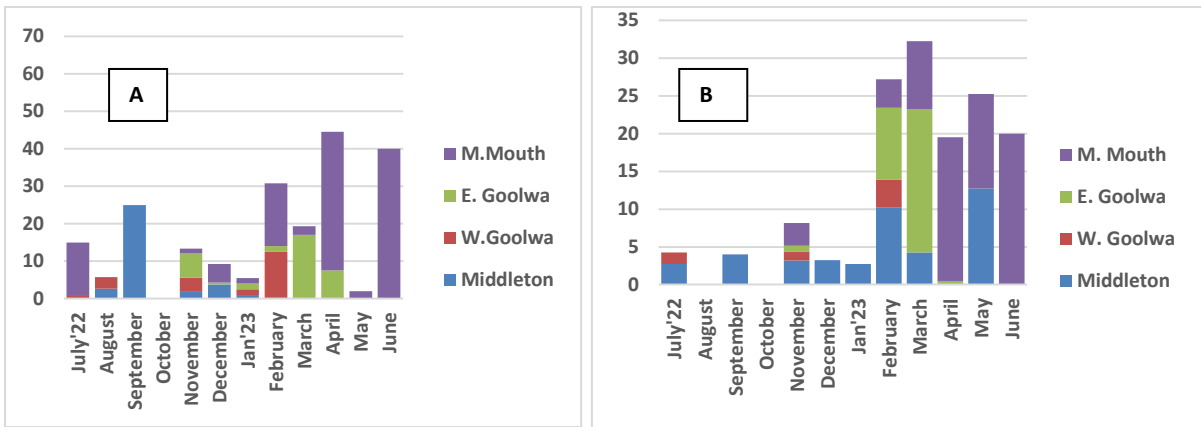
Coorong.

The 2022/23 Summer Ocean Beach survey was not able to be undertaken due to catastrophic weather conditions forecast on the planned day in Jan, 2023. However, the survey in the Lagoon was undertaken with a total of 22 POCs and no SOCs counted. These numbers were the lowest recorded for the lagoon, and may have been caused by the high level of freshwater from the flooded Murray River, leaving few sites for the birds to forage and roost. The 2023 winter count was not undertaken.

SE Fleurieu Peninsula.

During the first half of 2022/23, the ocean beaches were subjected to high freshwater flows emanating from the River Murray, with relatively high numbers of Pied Oystercatchers observed (Fig 3A), but lower than usual of “Sooties” (Fig. 3B). Volunteers further west at Bashams Beach and the Pullen Islands offshore from Port Elliot noted numbers of “Sooties” at these sites, however, the linkage with the high freshwater flows and this more westward distribution of “Sooties” is tenuous. After the closure of the Goolwa Barrages in January’23, numbers of both species increased at most sites, both in the estuary and on the ocean beaches.

Further to the west, reports of small numbers of “Sooties” were from Granite Island and Encounter Bay.



Figs 3 A & B: Cumulative relative abundances (nos. per site) of A, Pied Oystercatchers and B, Sooty Oystercatchers on the SE Fleurieu sites between Middleton and the Murray Estuary (July'22 – June'23).

During 2022/23, two banded Pied Oystercatchers were observed in this region. In April'23, a flagged POC was observed at Beacon 19 Ocean Beach (Fig. 4A). Although the sighting was reported to ABBBS (Australian Bat and Bird Banding Scheme), the code was in-decipherable, and so the distance moved for its original banding site and age-at-banding could not be determined. In June'23, Bob Green from FOSSE was able to photograph a banded POC inside the Murray Mouth (Fig. 4 B). As the types of coloured bands on this bird were only used up to 2007 by VWSG, it appears that this bird was a relatively long-lived one (+ 16 yrs).



Figs 4 A & B: Pictures of banded Pied Oystercatchers taken in a) April, 2023 at Beacon 19 Ocean Beach and b) the spit inside the Murray Mouth in June'23. Photo 4A: Keith Jones, Photo 4B: Bob Green.

Western Fleurieu Peninsula.

This last year, volunteer Barry Simes continued to regularly report on the numbers of Sooty Oystercatchers at Snapper Point (Aldinga Reef Aquatic Reserve) (Fig. 5).

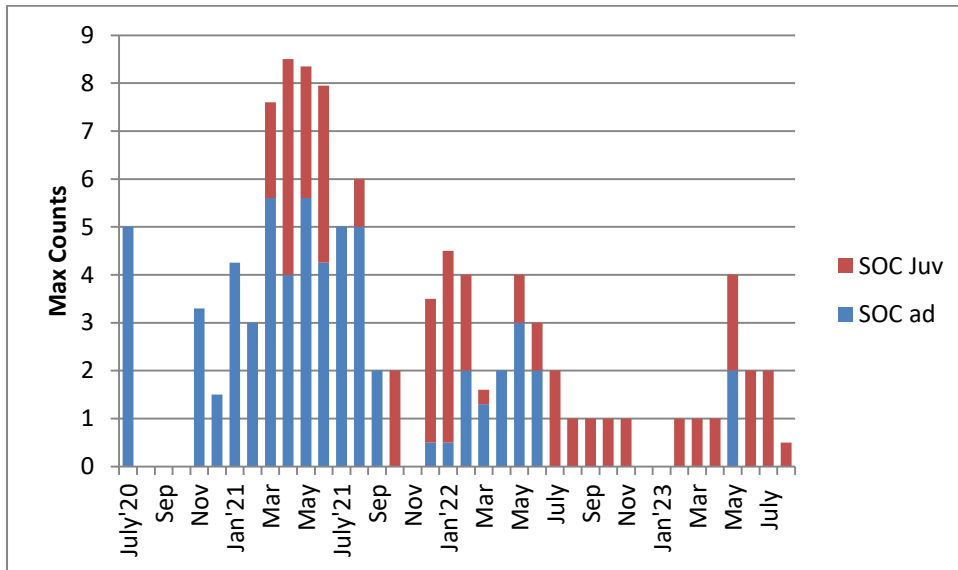
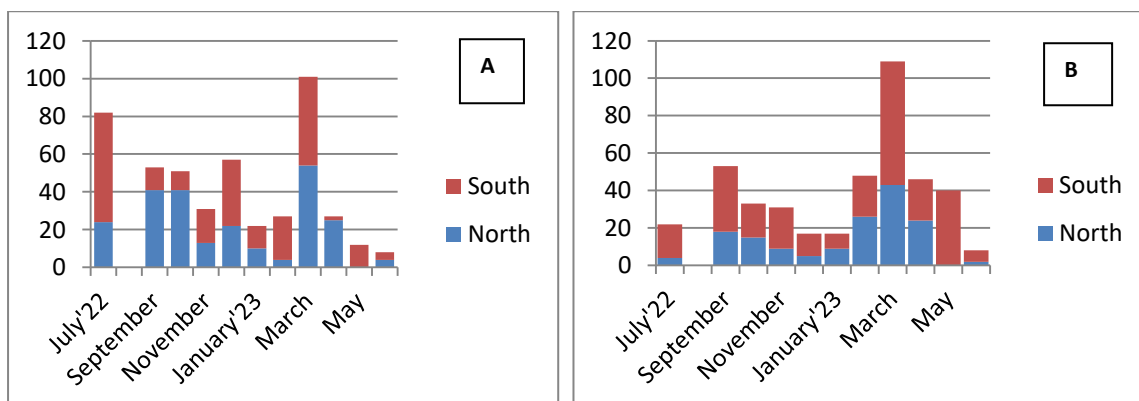


Fig. 5. Maximum monthly counts of Sooty Oystercatchers at Snapper Point, Western Fleurieu, July, 2020 – August, 2023.

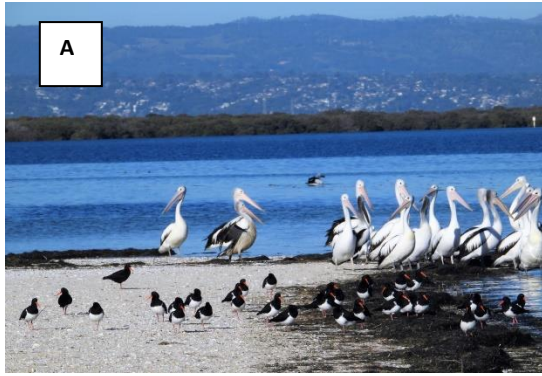
In contrast to previous years, numbers of both adult and juvenile SOC were lower in 2022/23, with relatively fewer numbers of adults seen. Small numbers of SOC were also reported by Hoodie volunteers at Hallett Cove, Ochre Point and the Carrickalinga Estuary. Interestingly, the rare sighting of a single foraging Pied Oystercatcher was reported from O’Sullivans Beach.

Samphire coast, NE Gulf St. Vincent.

Monthly maximum counts of Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers, mainly reported in Birddata, revealed large fluctuations for both species during 2022/23 (Figs. 6 A & B).



Figs. 6 A & B: Monthly maximum counts of A) Pied Oystercatchers and B) Sooty Oystercatchers for the southern and northern Samphire Coast, 2022/23. Note, no surveys were in August 2022.



Figs. 7 A & B: Pied Oystercatchers (A) and Sooty Oystercatchers (B) roosting amongst beach wrack at Bird Island, Outer Harbour in July, 2023. Photos: Kerri Bartley.

Relatively high POC counts in July'22 were observed at Bird Island and in March'23 at Bird Island, St. Kilda and the Proof Range near Port Wakefield (Fig 6A). High numbers of SOCs in July' 22 and March'23 were seen at similar sites to the POCs, except the Proof Range (Fig. 6B). Interestingly, both species were observed in relatively high numbers at Bird Island, again in July '23 (Figs. 7A & B).

Kangaroo Island

Monitoring of Pied and Sooty Oystercatchers at the 4 standard regions on Kangaroo Island continued throughout 2022/23 by Dave Potter, Jean Turner and Peter Hastwell. The long-term counts for these regions are seen in Figs 8 & 9, respectively. Since 2015/16, the cumulative mean count for POCs has not markedly changed, with a mean count of 202 +/- 7 (Fig. 8). For most years, the Bay of Shoals produced the highest counts; main sites included Reeves Point and Cape Rouge, which contained mainly of roosting flocks. In recent years, numbers have dropped at Island Beach.

For Sooty Oystercatchers, counts have increased over the years for all three regions (Fig. 9). The mean population size for the 8 years was 57 +/- 6.

It should be noted that these counts under-estimate the total KI populations as they don't include other sites where Dave Potter and Jean Turner have monitored, including American and Baudin Beaches and Antechamber Bay on the far NE coast, D'Estrees and Vivonne Bays on the South Coast, Snelling Beach on the North Coast and western Nepean Bay, Brownlow Beach and Redbanks.

During 2022/23, Dave and Jean continued to monitor breeding success (nos. of eggs hatched, chicks and fledged birds) of Pied Oystercatchers at many sites throughout the Island. Their results are provided in our previous Newsletter (March, 2023).

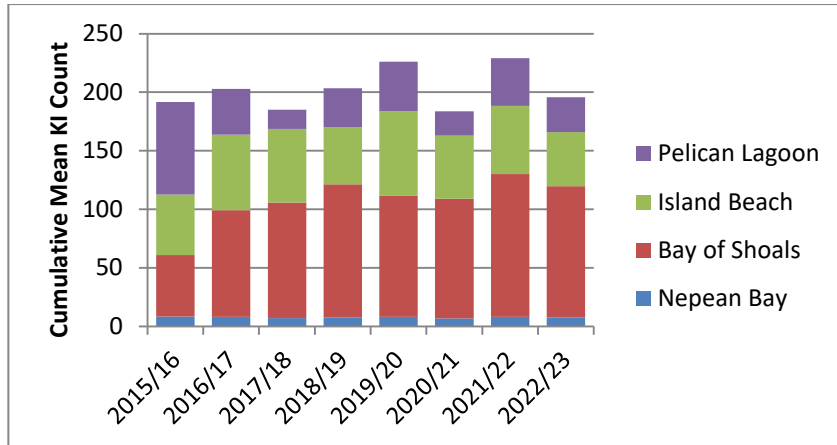


Fig. 8: Cumulative mean counts of Pied Oystercatchers at 4 regions on Kangaroo Island, 2015/16 – 2022/23.

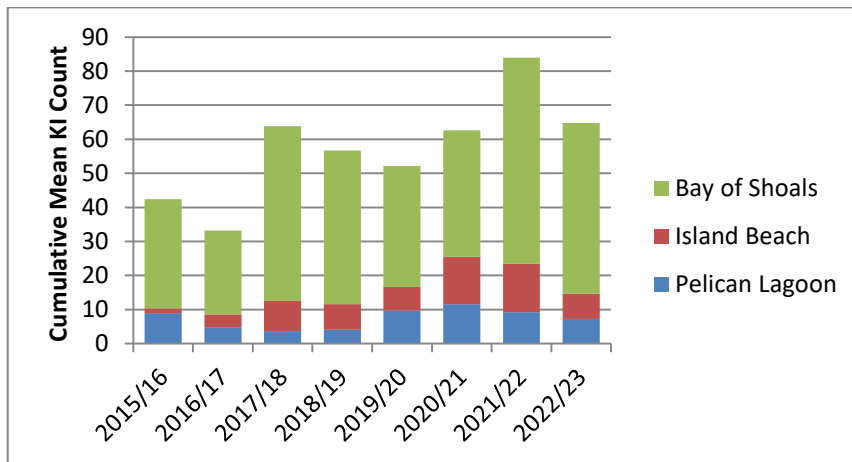


Fig. 9: Cumulative mean counts of Sooty Oystercatchers at 3 regions on Kangaroo Island, 2015/16 – 2022/23. Note: Sooty Oystercatchers not reported at Nepean Bay.

Pairs of mixed species of Oystercatchers observed in 2022/23 (“Odd Couples”).

In May, 2023, Team Oystercatcher volunteer, Roslyn Shirlaw had the opportunity to visit Troubridge Island, off SE Yorke Peninsula. She noticed, amongst a number of other shore and sea-bird species, three pairs of Sooty Oystercatchers and two pairs of SOC/POCs (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. One of two pairs of SOC/POCs photographed by Roslyn Shirlaw on Troubridge Island, May, 2023.

She understands that the local DEW Licences on the island haven't seen any breeding behaviour by either of the pairs. In South Australia, other SOC/POC pair(s?) have been observed for a number of years on the NE coast of Kangaroo Island (Baudin Beach, Brown Bay, Rocky Point and Pig Islet in Pelican Lagoon) (Dave Potter and Jean Turner, pers. com. and referred to in Team Oystercatcher Newsletters Nos 5 and 6).

Is there any evidence, elsewhere, that Sooty and Pied Oystercatchers inter-breed? In the past, occasional mixed pairs have been observed in Victoria, with one pair at Swan Island, near Queenscliff, Victoria producing eggs but it was unknown whether the eggs hatched. In December 1997, on Mud Islands in Port Phillip Bay an aberrant oystercatcher was observed, showing characteristics of both species (Collins et al, 1999). The observers discounted the possibility that the bird was a vagrant South Island Pied Oystercatcher or Variable Oystercatcher, both normally occurring in New Zealand. At the time of their observations, no DNA testing was available, but the authors have suggested possible mixed parentage (Collins et al, 1999).

Reference: Collins, P., Jessop, R., Minton, C, Graham, D. (1999) A possible record of hybridisation between Pied *Haematopus longirostris* and Sooty Oystercatchers *H. fuliginosus* at Mud Island, Victoria. Australian Bird Watcher 1999, **18**, 160 – 163.

Recent news on SA Shorebirds Foundation Grants.

During 2022/23, two grants were awarded. Firstly, the Price Progress Association (co-ordinator, Kylie Corell) was awarded a grant to develop and install educational signage at the Price Boat Ramp, Yorke Peninsula. Its purpose was to improve visitors' knowledge about the migratory and resident shorebirds that inhabit the Wills Conservation Park, a diverse range of habitats of mangroves, samphire beds and tidal flats. The project was completed and the signage launched in July, 2023 (Fig. 11). The project was supported by the Foundation, bird photographer, Craig Greer and the Price Men's Shed.



Fig. 11: Launch of the Price Educational Signage on coastal birds of the Wills Creek Conservation Park, July, 2023. Photo: Keith Jones

In May, 2023, the second grant was awarded to the Beach-Nesting Team of Birdlife Australia to carry out a two year banding program on Hooded Plovers on Kangaroo Island. The project aims to improve our knowledge about the breeding success and movements of vulnerable Hooded Plovers on the island. The field work will be undertaken during the 2023 and 2024 breeding seasons.

Workshops with local volunteers will also be held to assist in the identification and reporting of the banded birds.

The results of all projects supported by the SA Shorebirds Foundation are available on the Foundation's web-site, www.sashorebirds.org .

Acknowledgments.

The results of all projects outlined in this newsletter could not have been achieved without the assistance of many dedicated volunteers. These include the many members of the Victorian Wader Studies Group (VWSG), Friends of Shorebirds SE (FOSSE), Price Progress Association (Co-ordinator Kylie Correll), Birdlife Australia Beach-Nesting Team, KI Volunteers (David Potter, Jean Turner and Peter Hastwell), Kerri Bartley, Bob Green, Jenny Hiscock, Barry Simes, Roslyn Shirlaw, and all other volunteers who reported their counts either in Birddata or on the Birdlife Australia Beach-Nesting Portal.



Australian Pied Oystercatcher, Northern Spencer Gulf. Photo: Annette Marner