

Coexistence between Recreationists and Beach-nesting Birds: Conserving the Hooded Plover on our Coasts

Several of Australia's resident shorebirds nest directly on the beach, foredune or in the dunes during late spring and summer. Hooded Plovers are a primary example. Their simple nest scrapes in the sand and well-camouflaged eggs are very difficult to spot, and therefore at great risk of being trampled by visitors to the beach. People, unleashed dogs, horses and vehicles on beaches not only pose a direct threat to eggs, but they also disturb incubating adults. The parent birds will vacate the nest to safe-keep it from discovery and wait for the disturbance to end. This can occur for long periods, exposing the eggs to harsh temperatures, and predators such as ravens, gulls and foxes. Litter and discarded fishing bait also attract predators to beaches.

Once the eggs hatch, the tiny chicks are just as vulnerable to crushing – they are well camouflaged and cannot yet fly. Within the first 10 days of hatching, chicks need to be brooded, but if the parents are disturbed, the chicks can overheat or freeze to death. Chicks must feed themselves after hatching, but because they are easily disturbed by recreationists, they often do not spend enough time feeding and starve to death.

Victoria's coastline is heavily visited during the summer months and this is having a huge impact on the breeding success of Hooded Plovers. Because so few breeding pairs produce young successfully each year, their numbers are rapidly declining across Victoria. If this continues to occur, the species could become threatened with extinction. The risks are similar for many other beach-nesting species, such as the Beach Thick-knee, Pied Oystercatcher, and Sooty Oystercatcher.

Given the love Australian's have for beach recreation and the strong economy generated from coastal tourism, restricting humans from beaches is not a viable option for protecting the needs of our beach-nesting birds. Birds Australia has recently undertaken a project to promote coexistence between recreationists and beach-nesting birds, funded by the Australian Government's National Heritage Trust under a Regional Catchment Competitive Investment Grant, and hosted by Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (PPWCMA). The project also spans across four other coastal CMAs, including the Corangamite CMA.

The aim of this project is to improve and inform decision making for the conservation management of Australia's resident, beach-nesting birds, using the Hooded Plover in Victoria as a case study. Within each coastal CMA, five Hooded Plover territories will be selected for intensive on-ground management, to alleviate threats to breeding success. We will soon announce the location of these sites. On-ground works will rely heavily on community involvement and this is where you can help. Management will include community education programs, improved designation of on- and off-leash dog walking areas, temporarily fencing-off nesting sites, interpretive signs at beach access points, fox control programs, placement of chick shelters, and weeding. We are looking for volunteers to become involved in implementing protective measures for beach-nesting birds at their local beaches. Ultimately, the outcomes of these management efforts will be used to develop a management toolkit that can be used by communities and land managers across Australia for the conservation of beach-nesting birds.

Raising awareness and bringing about small changes in the behaviour of visitors to the beach will be the key to successful conservation of beach-nesting birds. If you enjoy surf fishing, horse-riding or walking your dog on the beach, there is a possibility that you are impacting on beach-nesting birds without even knowing it. Step one is to familiarise yourself with the beach-nesting birds at your local beach (Hooded Plover, Sooty and Pied Oystercatchers, Red-capped Plover). If present, become conscious of your actions during the summer – please walk your dog on a leash, ride your horse on the sand closest to the water's edge (where nests are unlikely to be), avoid walking in the dunes, and always place your litter, especially used fishing line, in a rubbish bin.

For more information, please visit www.birdsaustralia.com.au/projects/beach_nesting.html
If you would like to become actively involved in the beach-nesting birds project, we would like to hear from you. You can register your interest in this project by contacting Grainne Maguire at Birds Australia via g.maguire@birdsaustralia.com.au.