Shorebirds 2020 News

Spring 2010

Marsh Sandpiper by Dean Ingwersen

CARING FOR OUR COUNTRY

AWSG Australasian Wader Studies Group

Birds Australia
CONSERVATION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

Shorbirder Update

Another incredible count effort in 2010. Thank you for helping make 2010 another excellent year for monitoring shorebird populations. The cumulative efforts of so many volunteers combines to form what I've heard several suggest in recent months as one of the best biological data sets in Australia. Further, the amount of work that some individuals have put in to make shorebird monitoring a success is truly staggering. Many count coordinators have other jobs, or other responsibilities that leave them with little free time, and yet much of that time is spent volunteering to help inform shorebird conservation. These shorebird count data have been used recently to make the case to list Great Knot and Eastern Curlew as Vulnerable on the IUCN's red list. Further investigations into these data have led us to suggest that in Australia other migratory species are also meeting IUCN criteria and may need to be added to the red list soon. A team at the University of Queensland will be undertaking flyway wide analyses of these and other data which will result in much greater certainty regarding the magnitude of shorebird population changes and those factors driving those changes. Australian count data were also critical in making the case that an area that supports 0.1% of the flyway population of a migratory shorebird species should be viewed as nationally significant. Unfortunately, despite examples throughout the world of the value of this kind of bird monitoring program, and the above activities, in some circles here in Australia there is still doubt about the scientific value of what we are doing collectively. However, I am sure that if we continue to work to collect data in the same way on each count area visit, continue to improve our data management, and continue to increase our communication to decision makers these doubts will continue to fall away.

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2010/2011 Summer Counts

We would like to pin down the schedule for this summer's shorebird counts. Please check to see if the name(s) on the shorebird count schedule are the right contacts for counts this summer in each area, let us know about any new areas, and then please send us your planned count date(s). As usual we will be aiming to have at least one summer count in early February, and because of differences in tides etc. around the country we cannot set one date for the entire country. Let us know if you want help setting a count date, and for those areas free to count at any time we recommend February 5th. A count schedule which we will continue to update is available on-line at:

www.shorebirds.org.au/counting-shorebirds/count-schedules

In central and eastern Australia the return of water to many wetlands which have been dry for years should make for a fascinating birding trip or two. Please consider doing a count in one of the existing inland count areas, or random areas. Check out the maps on-line at:

www.shorebirds.org.au/counting-shorebirds/sites-maps

Also, we would welcome counts from other inland areas, but they are only informative if we have an understanding of the area on the ground you counted so please send a map or written description of the area counted. In too many historic records we cannot tell the difference between counts of an entire lake, versus counts of just a small section of the same lake. Finally, keep in mind that low or zero counts of areas where you would expect to see shorebirds are just as valuable as high counts. I'm guessing the available water this year will result in low counts of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, and to some degree Curlew Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, and even Red-necked Stint. These species I'm guessing will simply be more spread out than has been possible in recent years. We will need a fair bit of data though to determine how true such guesses might be.

Also, analyses is continuing to show the value of doing monthly counts, or at least three summer counts and one winter count in determining shorebird trends within each shorebird area. More counts throughout the year allow smaller changes in shorebird numbers to be identified more quickly. For example, on average one summer count of all the count areas in a shorebird area might allow you to identify an 80% change in numbers over 25 years, while three summer counts might allow a 40-50% change to be detected in 25 years, and monthly counts might allow a 40% change to be detected in 10 to 15 years. The once a summer & winter counts are giving us the information we need to detect national population changes because so many areas are being surveyed. If you are concerned about shorebird numbers in your area, but lack the resources or time to do more than one summer count per year, please let us know and we will explore ways to get more counts happening. Currently, many areas in Queensland, New South Wales and around Darwin in the NT are conducting monthly counts.

Most states still have some funds available to support counting and training efforts. These funds need to be devolved for a known purpose in the next few months, so please let us or your state coordinators know if there is something you see where a bit of funding would improve shorebird monitoring efforts in your state. Funds so far have gone toward supporting additional counting efforts, reimbursing some costs associated with coordinating counts, reimbursing fuel costs, or boat hire costs, funding intensive training where new keen observers are brought into one of the state's top sites to improve counting and identification, or support for additional or follow-up workshops.

Invitation to Melbourne workshop and fieldtrips.

A chance for those involved in shorebird population monitoring to share ideas. Come join us on November 28th outside of Melbourne to take part in a morning of presentations and group discussions on shorebird monitoring and conservation, followed by a count of the shorebirds at the bird rich Western Treatment Plant. A group of 9 Japanese shorebird experts will be visiting, and there will be presentations from Japanese and Australian counters / experts from 9:00 to 13:00. Please contact us if you would like to attend, and / or give a presentation on anything related to shorebird conservation, monitoring etc especially as it relates to your area. All are welcome!!

So far the Japanese have put their hand up to present, as have Shorebirds 2020 and the beach nesting birds project with a focus on Hooded Plovers. Contact us at shorebirds@birdsaustralia.com.au if you would like to come along. Also, the Japanese will be visiting a variety of shorebird sites in Victoria after the 28th. If there is sufficient interest we would gladly put together some site visits to some of the best places in Victoria with training on ID and counting, or just a chance to share ideas and visit some amazing places. Just let us know if you are interested.

Counts

New South Wales continues to count monthly at a number of core sites, but impressively the number of areas submitting surveys, and the number of counters has continued to grow, no doubt due in part to a number of workshops and efforts led by Phil Straw the state coordinator.

Conservation

Volunteers who monitor the Richmond River estuary in New South Wales won a long fought victory when they got council to agree to ban dogs from two important shorebird roosts. Congratulations to all involved (see below for more detail).

Counts

Led by Gavin O'Brien and Arthur Keats monthly counts at some roosts are continuing, and the federal government is now keen to do some additional surveys in some of the more remote areas of the NT. We regret that these plans have cancelled plans made by the NT counters to get Peter Driscoll to do some remote counting, but will continue to advocate for more repeated surveys in parts of the NT in future.

Conservation

Sheryl Keats is leading an effort to get the regulations restricting horse and dog access to the roost between Lee Point and Buffalo Creek actually enforced. We wish her all the best in her efforts to protect this significant habitat.

Counts

Led by the QWSG with some assistance from Birds Australia, and BOCA groups, the monthly counts have continued in many areas in the state, and a growing number of areas are being surveyed at least once per summer. The University of Queensland has led an effort to analyse the Moreton Bay dataset which has highlighted the value of monthly standardised counts. They found significant declines in seven shorebird species (43-79%), and one species showing significant increases. They also found some evidence of decline in another five species, with some evidence of increases in another three. A scientific paper on their findings is currently in review, and is expected to be published fairly soon.

Conservation

Disturbance continues to be a potential problem at shorebird roosts in several areas throughout the state, and the QWSG has been collecting data on disturbance to continue to inform on what measures are needed to protect shorebirds from excessive disturbance levels.

Counts

The counts over the last two years in South Australia have been the most comprehensive ever conducted. This is thanks in large part to the efforts of Birds SA, the Adelaide and Mount Lofty NRM and their support of a BA shorebird project in Gulf St Vincent, the continued efforts of Jane Cooper along the Eyre Peninsula, Jeff Campbell, Maureen Christie in the SE, Paul Wainwright in the Coorong, Mel Berris around Kangaroo Island, and Travis Hague along the east side of the Spencer Gulf. We now have much improved mapping of the shorebird habitats in South Australia, and an understanding of how much repeated summer counts would help us detect trends within each area, assuming we could find the resources to make such frequent monitoring possible.

Conservation

First, the good news! Banded Stilt were in real need of a good breeding year, with concern for the species growing. Fortunately, all the water this year led to an incredible 200,000 chicks hatched at Lake Torrens. More info on-line at:
www.awsg.org.au/pdfs/Lake-Torrens.pdf

With strong flows in the Murray, and water returning to many areas in the SE like Bool Lagoon, this could be a much better year in the SE for shorebirds than has been seen in a long time. It is still not certain if there will be sufficient water to freshen up the southern lagoon of Coorong, or if it does how long it may take for the benthic bugs to recover, but the possibility of some recovery to what was a dying system is great news. Evidence continues to highlight that disturbance is likely to grow in some areas like the beaches north of Adelaide, or in some places along the Eyre Peninsula without still further management of human activity in some areas. Also, there is a chance that the Dry Creek saltfields outside of Adelaide which support large numbers of shorebirds, may undergo some significant management changes, and we are keen to see that no matter what happens, management that is sympathetic to shorebirds also continues.

Counts

Counts have continued in summer and winter continuing some of the longest term shorebird datasets in the country. Counts were led by Eric Woehler, with help from Denis Charlesworth, Ralph Cooper, Hazel Britton, Liz Znidersic, Mavis Burgess, Stewart Blackhall, and Peter Duckworth among many others. Ralph Cooper is working on an MS for Stilt on the long-term shorebird trends in NE Tasmania.

Conservation

More Good News: After more than 9 years working against the Walker Corporation's proposed canal estate at Lauderdale in Ralphs Bay, southeast Tasmania, Birds Tasmania was rewarded with the news that the Tasmanian Premier has accepted the recommendations made by the Tasmanian Planning Commission to reject the development. In addition, the Premier has announced the Tasmanian Government would look to ban canal estates from Tasmania. Birds Tasmania has been fighting the proposed construction that would destroy a declared coastal Conservation Area, nationally and internationally significant for resident and migratory shorebirds. Congratulations to Eric Wohler, Birds Tasmania, and the many others involved in this great win!

Counts

Nearly comprehensive counts of the shorebird areas throughout Victoria were conducted again this year with the help of many counters throughout the state. The project looking to map and optimise monitoring in the Bellarine Peninsula and western Melbourne region came to a close. Thanks to the efforts of Ash Herrod, John Newman and many others we now have a much improved understanding of the distribution of shorebirds in the region, how little movement there is of shorebirds between shorebird areas that are relatively close to one another, and of how much doing more counts in summer would allow smaller changes in numbers to be detected more quickly. Rob Farnes also should be recognised for his efforts to coordinate a team to count much of the coast from Port Fairy to the South Australian border. Many thanks to the many involved, and I hope many of you are able to visit some of these count areas in northern Victoria where water has finally returned.

Conservation

A project ran by ARI in conjunction with BOCA is building our understanding of shorebird distributions, and factors related to changes in numbers in Western Port. A similar but less rigorous project is slated to start this year in Corner Inlet thanks to Susan Taylor from DSE, and generally many of the major shorebird sites are being well looked after thanks to the efforts of Parks Victoria, DSE, Melbourne Water, local governments, and community groups. The Gippsland Lakes remain an area that is not well understood, but was showing increasing signs of degradation. Disturbance is growing in a few areas, but of most immediate concern is the continued battle being waged on a tiny patch of Latham's Snipe habitat. For years a land owner in Port Fairy has been keen to develop a few hectares adjacent to a wetland, but the development has been held up due to the unusually large numbers of Latham's Snipe that use the area. I'm not aware of another place in the country where such large numbers of Latham's Snipe can be found so regularly (anywhere from 30 to approx. 400 snipe are routinely reported). This year the land owner once again decided to mow a hectare or more of the long grass used for roosting, and time will tell if a common sense solution can be found to protect these birds.

Counts

The increased count efforts in WA have continued this year, with a project focussed on shorebird monitoring in Peel Inlet, continued counts in the Esperance region, expanded coverage across the Swan Coastal Plain, continued monitoring in Shark Bay, as well as the core monitoring activities in NW WA and the rest of WA. This year Kim Onton took on much more of the coordination for the state, and then compiled, vetted, and prepared the data for the next Stilt summary. This is a huge task that usually falls to us in the national office but Kim was able to do it in her free time! Many thanks to Kim, the summary below is compiled from some of Kim's updates.

Shorebirds surveys were undertaken around Western Australia in summer 2010 as part of the national shorebird count coordinated by Birds Australia's Shorebirds 2020 project. In WA, at least 17 shorebird areas, comprised of over 100 separate count sites, were surveyed including Roebuck Bay, Eighty Mile Beach, Shark Bay, Hutt Lagoon, Wagin and Katanning Lakes, Swan Coastal Lakes, Swan River, Rottnest Island, Woodman Point, Garden Island, Peel Estuary and Yalgorup lakes, Vasse-Wonnerup Estuary, Wilson Inlet, Albany, Esperance, Lake Gore and Warden Lakes. Over 442,000 shorebirds and over 118,000 waterbirds and other coastal/wetland birds were counted throughout the surveys which centered around the weekend of the 6th-7th February, though some counts were undertaken in the weeks before and after due to participant availability and site access. The site coverage was the most exhaustive of recent years, a credit to the 16 site coordinators and their survey participants, some of whom covered extensive areas in remote and regional WA.

This year marked the first in which an online data entry system was introduced that aimed to reduce the amount of time involved in entering data and reduce entry errors.

Thanks to all who participated in the surveys for your tremendous efforts, particularly the site coordinators John Blyth, Anne Bondin, Les George, Cheryl Gole, Chris Hassell, Colin Heap, David James, Suzanne Mather, Mark Newman, Robyn Pickering, Ken Read, Dick Rule, David Secomb, Marion Shaw, Toni Webster and Boyd Wykes. Special thanks also to those who assisted in the proofing of this data collation.

Funding for this year's annual MYSMA counts at Roebuck Bay and 80 Mile Beach are yet to be confirmed entirely. Birds Australia's Vic Group, has agreed to help out, but hopes for much of the funding rest with AWSG's funding application submitted to Woodside.

Conservation

Several of the big shorebird areas in the south of the state continue to face growing pressure from human activity, but in Wilson Inlet management of water levels has led to reduced numbers of shorebirds in the inlet for a couple of years now. Wilson Inlet is a natural lagoon, which for years had been breached artificially, which in turn maintained the habitat in the inlet in a way that was suitable for significant populations of migratory shorebirds. A couple of years ago, a decision was made not to breach the inlet, and there was a documented 80%+ reduction in shorebirds using the area. In the following year submissions on behalf of shorebirds were made by the Albany Bird Group, BA and others, and in the subsequent year the inlet was breached with a protocol set up to establish when breaches would occur in future. This year water levels did not meet the criteria established to warrant a breach. Unfortunately, this will likely result in unsuitable conditions for shorebirds again this year whose numbers have yet to recover from management decisions taken a couple of years ago. While I understand that there are competing environmental concerns regarding conducting an artificial breach I have yet to be shown that those concerns are as well founded as the already well documented impact this is having to migratory shorebirds.

International news:

Anecdotal news comes to us from throughout the flyway of increasing pressures on migratory shorebird habitats from Japan to Vietnam. For example this came to us recently from the Taiwan Wader Study Group:

"I'll give you brief report regarding a 4000 ha of intertidal mudflat reclamation project at Changhua Taiwan. This is the last largest estuarine ecosystem and IBA of Saunders' Gulls, Eastern Curlews, Eurasian Curlews, however the government and the developer are going to reclaimed as a petrochemical plant. This will be a crisis of feeding habitat loss for wintering and migrating shorebirds on the flyway. Please help us."

-Chia Yang Tsai - Taiwan Wader Study Group

The most sobering news to reach us recently, however, is Chris Hassell and Adrian Boyle's report on what is happening in China's Bohai Sea. A summary is below from Adrian, but please take the time to look at the report Chris mentions below:

The GFN report of the field work in Bohai Bay, Northern China during April and May 2010 is now up on the GFN webpage.www.globalflywaynetwork.com.au/

There will also be a scientific paper published in the next volume of 'Emu-Austral Ornithology' using the data from our 2009 visit and the data from Yan Hong Yan.

This report highlights the pressures that the migratory birds are facing during their stopover periods in the Yellow Sea. If you go to the front page of the website there is a blue box on the left hand side and it is the bottom item in there.

Cheers Chris Hassell

Here's a summary from Adrian passed round on a recent e-mail.

Hi all
Thought I would pass on some very disturbing issues facing our shorebirds. During April and May in both 2009 and 2010 I have been working in the Bohai Sea (China) on Red Knots for the Global Flyway Network with Chris Hassell. Red Knot populations have been declining for many years now and it is predicted that in the next few years there will be a major crash in 2 subspecies rogersi and persmai that visit Australia and New Zealand. The huge amount of habitat loss on the staging grounds is thought to be driving these declines. The amount of habitat loss that has occurred in the Yellow Sea (the main site for migrating shorebirds from our flyway) is staggering. It is reported in the Bohai Sea alone in the last 10 years 453km2 of offshore area including 156km2 of intertidal mudflats have been destroyed.

The main staging site for Red Knots on Northward migration has only recently been found in the north west area of the Bohai Sea in China. This area is one of the most populated places on the planet and humans are visible everywhere. The Bohai Sea is the most polluted sea in the world and absorbs nearly 5.7 billion tones of sewage each year, 2 million tones of solid waste and 43 of its 52 rivers that flow into it are heavily polluted.

Massive loss of habitat due to industrial development has destroyed hundreds of square km of mudflats and has now pushed the 50,000 Red Knot and many other shorebird species that feed in this bay into a small and rapidly reducing band of mudflat. A Chinese friend that is studying for a PhD on Red Knots in the area has already lost 4 of her survey areas and in the time between my last and next visit this shoreline will have reduced from 23km to just 17.5km. The destruction of a further 5.5km is now underway and it is not known how much of this will be left on my next visit. With no protection for the remaining mudflat it is predicted that this will also vanish over the next few years. The China marine environment monitoring center estimates that between 2006 and 2010 1000km2 of land were reclaimed each year in China alone. Figures for Korea are not known at this stage.
Curlew Sandpipers may also show some dramatic declines soon as on a 5.5km stretch of mudflat is currently being destroyed. This area supported a staggering 80,000 feeding Curlew Sandpiper in April 2010.
Red Knot are very specific in the prey items they will eat and will likely struggle to find any other area suitable to stage. The main reason for the habitat loss is to create land for industry. This of course provides us with the many items that we ALL have in our house. Caofeidian project was a development mainly for shipping with most of this being for Australian Iron Ore ships. This development destroyed more than 65km2 of mudflat and is adjacent to our main survey area. This is also a site where the major industry that once polluted Beijing (a steel works) was moved to make clearer skies for the environmentally friendly Olympics. Unfortunately, money talks and the price of newly created land is a lot cheaper than already existing land. This is the driving force behind the destruction and as the world demands more products from China industry will continue to build.
It is a sad state of affairs with many environmental groups trying to halt the loss of tidal mudflats in the very important Yellow Sea, but so far with very little success. Unless there is a major swing in government opinion then habitat destruction will continue until it is all gone. Unfortunately, it won't take much longer to loose all this habitat with new developments popping up everywhere.

A few images taken at the site and showing the issues and threats can be seen at the below address.
Each photo has information posted below the image explaining what they are.
http://www.pbase.com/wildlifeimages/shorebird_threats
A recent radio interview by Chris Hassell and myself on this topic can be viewed at.
http://www.aqob.com.au/list.php?s_id=185&seo=Migratory_shorebirds_and_tidal_flats(series)&menuid=category_id_25
Further information on some other Shorebird habitat loss can be found at.
http://www.birdskorea.org/Habitats/Wetlands/Saemangeum/BK-HA-Saemangeum-Mainpage.shtml

Cheers Adrian Boyle

National news:

House of Reps report recommendations
A recent report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts ('Managing our coastal zone in a changing climate: The time to act is now', 2009) is scheduled to be reviewed over the next month or two. Within the report are a number of recommendations that those who recently attended the Coast to Coast conference in Adelaide will be supporting. Included in those recommendations are Recommendation 32 brought together in large part thanks to work by Birds Australia President Alison Russell-French and Birds Tasmania Chair Eric Woehler. Please let the government know that you support the recommendations in the report including Recommendation 32 below:

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government:

- work through the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council and in consultation with Birds Australia and other stakeholders to implement a National Shorebirds Protection Strategy. The strategy should focus on tightening restrictions on beach driving and access to bird breeding habitat, preserving habitat, identifying suitable buffer zones for migration of coastal bird habitat, managing pest animals and increased public education
- provide further funding to Birds Australia and other research groups to ensure continued monitoring and data collection with regard to migratory and resident shorebirds
- provide funding to strengthen partnerships between domestic and international shorebird conservation groups to increase awareness and conservation efforts in other countries
- commission a detailed climate change impact study on Australia's migratory and resident shorebirds
- in its consideration of amendments to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 following the independent review, give consideration to the formal listing of coastal shorebird and sea bird communities as threatened species/ecological communities under the act

Common sense needed regarding access to the coast by vehicles
A group of people at the recent Coast to Coast conference in Adelaide also recognised the need to address the growing impacts from vehicles on beaches. A need for a national plan to prioritise which areas are in most need of restricting access was one of the things discussed. Both migratory and resident shorebirds are being impacted in some areas by vehicles on beaches. We therefore think that shorebird habitat, which is protected by both EPBC, and international agreements should form a part of the decision making regarding where to restrict vehicle access. If you would like to get involved with a group of people working on this problem nationally, send us an e-mail at shorebirds@birdsaustralia.com.au

I**f your area supports 0.1% of the flyway population it is nationally significant** – It is looking increasingly likely that the federal government will adopt these criteria to recognise nationally significant shorebird habitat under EPBC.

Workshops:
Eighteen Shorebirds 2020 workshops have been held throughout the country which have been attended by over 660 people. Shorebirds 2020 workshop material has also been presented at another five workshops. So far the feedback from the workshops has been mostly positive, with attendees taking away a greater appreciation of shorebird ecology, threats, identification, and the Shorebirds 2020 program.

Below is a report from the Townsville Region Bird Observers Club on one of these workshops.

Shorebirds 2020 Workshop: Cungulla Community Hall on Saturday 23rd January 2010.

Townsville Region Bird Observers Club (TRBOC) hosted a shorebirds identification workshop on Saturday 23rd January 2010 at Cungulla a fishing village close to the mouth of the Haughton River. The main objective of the workshop was to increase the identification skills of local birdwatchers enabling them to participate in the national Shorebirds 2020 population monitoring project.

The Shorebirds 2020 project is managed by Birds Australia using funding provided by the Federal Government's Caring for our Country programme.
The workshop comprised of a 2 hour classroom session held in the Cungulla Community Hall with particular focus on the 28 shorebirds likely to be seen in the Townsville region. The attendees then adjourned to the nearby beach where experienced shorebird observers were on hand to help the beginners with identification of the shorebirds present on the mudflats.
Fifty persons attended the workshop and while 30 were birders from TRBOC or Birds Australia North Queensland (BANQ) we were very pleased to welcome another 20 persons from local organisations such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), Department of Resource Management (DERM), Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS), CSIRO, James Cook University (JCU) and locals from Cungulla.

Seven TRBOC members helped in the organisation of the classroom session while 10 members provided their experience to the attendees with the identification of shorebirds on the beach.

The two main speakers were George Baker who explained the importance of local surveys to the overall objectives of the Shorebirds 2020 program and John Lowry who provided us with a number of important aids to the identification of shorebirds. We learnt the importance of checking out the key features of the bird before trying to name the species.
On completion of the training, TRBOC encouraged persons to join the Shorebirds 2020 programme, initially as a member of the teams already monitoring shorebird sites in our region.

TRBOC wish to thanks the Shorebirds 2020 team for their support of this workshop; they provided much of the support materials and funding to TRBOC to cover the costs of running this workshop.

G. Baker.

Profiles of two Shorebird Observers

First: Jane Cooper Eyre Peninsula, SA

Q : How long have you been counting shorebirds ?
A: 30 years

Q : How did you first get interested in shorebirds ?
A : I first started monitoring shorebirds on Eyre Peninsula in 1979 when I moved to Streaky Bay and David Close asked me to survey likely shorebird sites in the area, including Streaky Bay, Baird Bay, Sceale Bay and Seagull Lake, Venus Bay and Lake Newland, for the AWSG National Wader Count.

Q : Why are shorebirds better than other birds ?
A : I'm not sure that shorebirds are better than other birds ! They certainly take up most of my waking hours at the moment; organising, surveying, recording, reporting, motivating, educating …. The list is endless and there's never enough hours in the day; for the most part the work is voluntary.

I secretly hanker after a month camping on the Nullabor or among the mallee scrublands in the Gawler Ranges! Anywhere with a campfire and the smell of the bush and a multitude of bush birds around my tent.

Q : Tell us about your shorebird patch.
A : I first discovered the tidal creek on Point Gibson in 1979. In those days it was a pristine estuarine system within Streaky Bay; an extensive temperate mangrove woodland with a network of intertidal creeks, coastal saltmarsh and mudflats that stretched to the edge of the world.

I used to walk 12 km to get to the best high tide roost in the area, often swimming the creek if I misjudged the tide. The area regularly supported at least 3000 waders, including significant numbers of Ruddy Turnstone, Grey Plover, Common Greenshank and Red-Necked Stint. But more importantly there was a high species diversity; 29 species including Eastern Curlew, Oriental Plover, Wood Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Sand Plovers, Double-banded Plovers and Australian Pratincole.

The site was regularly used as a crèche for breeding Fairy Terns and a rich feeding ground for the Eastern Osprey and White-breasted Sea-eagles that nested nearby.

From 1979 -1991 I did not encounter another soul on that patch.

Sadly with the advent of a burgeoning oyster-farming industry, the intertidal flats have been claimed for aquaculture; the high tide roost is hemmed in by a multitude of leases; the 12 km of bush track and beach is used by locals to exercise their dogs and teach their girlfriends how to drive. The Eastern Curlews have retreated further north to a secluded section of Acraman Creek CP and the plover and sandpiper roosts are more widely dispersed along the Gibson Peninsula coast.

Gavin O'Brien: Darwin, NT

• Migratory shorebirds have interested me for many years, particularly since I found myself on a grassy plain near Fogg Dam outside of Darwin twenty years ago, containing tens of thousands of Little Curlew which had probably just arrived on inward migration. This was enough to initiate a special interest in migratory shorebirds. There followed several years during which I tried to figure out just which wader species I was looking at; indeed, even after all of these years I still find myself spending time trying to separate some species.

• I started counting sample groups of migratory shorebirds with the aid of binoculars while doing Bird Atlas survey work from 2000 and making notes of flags and markers. These notes and statistics were not very systematic because at that time my first priority was to prepare species lists for the Atlas project and I did not have a suitable telescope. I purchased a spotting scope to improve my ability to distinguish different waders and in recent years spent more time with people with identification and counting skills. My wife Meg and I had assisted Arthur and Sheryl Keates during several national counts during the last two or three years. I have been counting shorebirds to provide statistics to the 2020 project since September 2008 when they and several other regular shorebird counters left Darwin. For some years I have also been despatching information on flags and bands.

• Meg and I participated in netting and banding shorebirds with Clive Minton's team in Darwin and Finniss River during September 2008. In December I attended the Broome shorebird identification and counting workshop which helped to further concentrate my interest. Other participants provided me with useful suggestions on how to attract necessary support with shorebird counting activities. These workshops and projects alerted me to the environmental impacts to which migratory waders are increasingly subject and have provided me with an appreciation of the importance of counting.

• It is easy to be interested in shorebirds. The change of colour of many shorebird species as they move in and out of their breeding plumage is spectacular and it is incredible to consider the vast distances they take during annual migratory movements. The actions of the spring tides tend to concentrate shorebirds in roosting areas where they are comparatively easy to see. One can appreciate the regular population fluctuations which occur throughout the year. I don't have much interest in going out of my way to find the next new species; I am a "clicker" rather than a "twitcher". In the longer term it may be possible to determine trends over several years and for the longer period. Even when a person is unable to accomplish this alone, he or she can do so by contributing to statistics banks such as 2020 Shorebirds.

• I regularly count the five most accessible harbour and coastline locations in Darwin, being East Point, Spot On Marine Salt Works, Nightcliff, Sandy Creek and Lee Point Beach. The most distant of these are about 13 kilometres apart. Lee Point provides the largest groups of shorebirds, regularly in excess of 5,000 in October and November as many shorebirds pass through Darwin on the way to feeding grounds in the south. I try to obtain an estimate of population fluctuations by undertaking at least one or two complete counts of all of these sites over two day periods in the best possible tidal conditions during each series of spring tides. Excellent assistance is provided by a number of other counters, some more experienced than me and others less experienced. They support shorebird counts regularly and particularly during National Counts when we attempt to count all of the sites on the same tide. Meg comes out with me on most shorebird exercises.

• I prepare a three monthly written article on fluctuations of the ten or twelve most numerous of the shorebird species to the NT Naturalist. This is monthly magazine circulated to people with wide ranging inter-

ests in nature. I propose over the coming year to extend regular counts to some inland water bodies. These counts will be carried out during the early part of the wet season before the grass and reeds grow too high and make shorebird counting impossible at these locations. This will provide information on the movements of a number of additional migrant species passing through Darwin. Over the coming year I also propose to undertake monthly counts, where possible, of the intertidal zone in Kululuk Bay, between Nightcliff and East Point. The area has recently been targeted by developers for construction of a sea wall, a boating marina and luxury flats and which would, if approved, block all tidal movement within the bay.

The long road toward further conserving shorebirds in Richmond Estuary, NSW

On 24 June 2010 our local council, Ballina Shire Council, voted unanimously to prohibit dogs from two key shorebird roosting sites in the shire. This was a major victory for a small group of Birds Australia 2020 shorebird watchers, who have been lobbying Ballina Council for some years about the matter

Ballina, in northern NSW, is a seaside town of approximately 20,000 people with nearly 40,000 people in the shire, and is around 100kms south of the Queensland border, and a bit over 20 kms south of Byron Bay. It has the usual population pressures of a seachange town, and this includes an increasing number of dogs and dog owners.

Ballina sits on the Richmond River, which is a large river system, nearly 500m wide where it empties into the Pacific Ocean, and around 1 km wide not far upstream. It has a number of shorebird roosting sites, and an extensive system of sandbars which shorebirds use for feeding at low tide. Two of the roosting sites, which are easily accessible to the public, are the Flat Rock rock platform and the island in Lake Chickiba. It is these two sites that have recently been proclaimed dog free.

The prohibition of dogs from Flat Rock was always going to be contentious, as it's a small exposed flat rock platform located between two popular beaches with good public access. Many local surveyors consider the tip of the Flat Rock rock platform to be the most easterly point in Australia, just beating Byron Bay headland by a matter of metres. If the wind is in the right quarter it's a good surfing spot. However, during the migratory shorebird period, over 1200 birds can assemble on the platform at high tide. The platform sits as a stand-alone system, and would measure approximately 100m wide and 150m long, so it's not large.

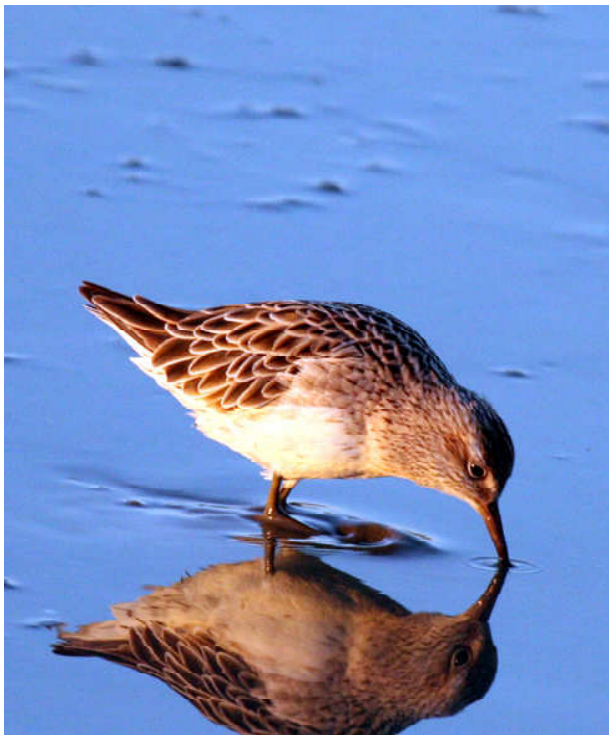
For the BA 2020 volunteers, frustration was an ongoing problem, as many dog owners continually ignored the Council requirement to have their dogs on a lead, letting them run free, and of course, once any dog was on the Flat Rock rock platform, the inevitable bird chase ensued. It was quite common to see over 5 unleashed dogs chasing birds in a one hour period. To be fair, there are quite a few responsible dog owners who always leashed their dogs. But, it only takes one or more irresponsible dog owner's!

The other roosting site, Lake Chickiba, is an artificially created lake with the deliberate creation of a roosting island as part of its development. This was created as part of an overall project in relation to the construction of a major vehicle bridge over a large estuary called North Creek. The building of the bridge caused the destruction of some precious shorebird roosting sites, so the environment impact statement required the creation of an alternative roosting island in Lake Chickiba. It is now used extensively by shorebirds, with over 600 birds assembling there. Lake Chickiba is easily accessed as it's near a main road in the area, but the traffic doesn't upset the birds. Furthermore, from the birds perspective, it's only about 4kms from the ocean and 1 km from North Creek.

A concerted letter writing campaign to Council about the dogs off leash matter began over 4 to 5 years ago by a member of our team, along with several meetings with the Council's Environment Officer. The main area of concern was Flat Rock. To a far lesser degree, we did have a dogs issue at Lake Chickiba, however, and more importantly, there were continual disturbances to the birds by a surf ski paddler who insisted on paddling up to the island shore where the birds were roosting. After a number of requests to Ballina Council staff, they have approached the paddler and asked him to desist in landing on the roosting island, and he now complies.

We had continually identified to the Council Environment Office their obligations under the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act and the NSW State Threatened Species Act.

Interestingly, the dogs off leash issue came to public prominence in the Ballina Shire, with plenty of media coverage, when a pro dog lobby group started pushing for a trial daily 2 hour dogs off leash proposal for the two beaches adjacent to Flat Rock. It should be noted that there are currently a total of 5 separate areas around the Shire that are designated dogs off leash, including a substantial area of beach just to the north of Lennox Head.



At the moment the beaches around Flat Rock are a dogs on leash area only, but the requirement is often and frequently ignored. To have the off leash proposal approved by Council would be disastrous for the shorebirds at the Flat Rock roosting site. We quickly organised a comprehensive submission, under the Birds Australia banner, outlining the conservation issues concerning the shorebirds, and the effect of off leash dogs roaming on to the rock platform. There were a number of other community organizations, such as Dunecare, that wrote submissions opposing the proposal.

We've kept Rob Clemens from BA informed by email about our problems and submissions and he's offered a number of useful suggestions, which we've incorporated into our strategies.

When Ballina Council staff released its decision about the dogs off leash issue, it not only rejected the dogs off leash proposal, it additionally prohibited dogs from the Flat Rock rock platform and Lake Chickiba in recognition of the conservation aspects and the need for preservation of both roosting sites.

It quickly became apparent that our submission had a major influence in the staff deliberations and one of our 2020 shorebird team was allowed to make a 5-minute presentation to the meeting of Councillors in support of the dog prohibition decision. A number of Councillors are noted for their anti environmental sentiments. So, you can imagine how ecstatic we were when Councillors voted unanimously to prohibit dogs from the Flat Rock and Lake Chickiba shorebird roosting sites. We had to wait until we exited the Council chambers and out onto the street for the celebratory hugs.

It's a great outcome for the shorebirds, and great satisfaction for the 2020 team for a lot of hard work over the years. There has also been subsequent positive front page media coverage in the local paper about our campaign.

Friends of Shorebirds SE Wins Conservation Award

The Best Biodiversity Project award recognises a Friends of Parks group that has made an outstanding contribution to biodiversity conservation. For the past five years a small but very dedicated group of enthusiastic volunteers has painstakingly monitored and recorded shorebird activity along the Limestone Coast, the Coorong and beyond with stunning results. The Friends of Parks adjudicating panel was particularly impressed with the scientific integrity of the project noting that credible and effective monitoring of shorebirds requires constant and planned use of time, energy and resources. Significant expertise has been developed by group members who work closely with Birds Australia, scientists and specialists to ensure their techniques and methodology are robust and valid. Friends of Shorebirds SE are worthy winners of this biodiversity conservation award and we thank Leah McIntyre, Coast and Marine Officer (DEH) for the nomination.

Three Notes on Shorebirds 2020 Methodology

Data Management. As more and more groups from around the country collect the data we are asking for, and enter and manage that data on-line, the value of the collective data set is growing enormously. Given the staff at national office looks likely to be reduced, it is likely that we will not be able to continue to accept data that is either not on a data sheet, or entered on-line. Again the data set is much more powerful when national in scale, so if your are not doing so already we would really encourage you to enter data on-line at http://data.shorebirds.org.au or send us a paper data sheet available from http://shorebirds.org.au/pdfs/Count_Form_taxonomic_order.pdf
Please contact us if you need a username or password at shorebirds@birdsaustralia.com.au

Also, it is much easier for local coordinators and the national office to collate data which has been entered by the lead counter in each count area. We are developing a user manual for the on-line system but in the meantime please don't hesitate to contact us if you need help sorting out the on-line system, or if you are a coordinator who wants to sort out how easy it can be to manage your area's records on-line. We've found in some areas it is very helpful for a group to share one username and password, so everyone can enter, view, edit and download all the records for that area. In other areas individuals from an area submit their records separately. Either way is a huge help to us.
Generally, data entry is much more accurate when it is entered by those who collected it, or at least by those who know the area. Also, if possible please take the time to fill in the other data on the survey form. These extra data are designed to give us more powerful information, and help us overcome many of the past criticisms of historic data that was collected.

Thank you to all of you who have submitted data already, and for those who have yet to submit last summer's counts, please send them in so we can put them together for the next Stilt Summary.

The Value of counting people. Most of you would be aware of examples of places that shorebirds no longer use because levels of disturbance have become too high. Growing evidence is also suggesting that the energetic costs to shorebirds may be fairly high long before an area is abandoned. We would like to be able to give local managers data on the changing levels of human activity near shorebird habitats, in order to strengthen the case to limit access to some of these areas. Throughout the country, we are seeing anecdotal evidence of increasing levels of human activity close to shorebirds, and we expect these potential disturbances to grow. We are also, interested in finding out if there are threshold levels of disturbance which will result in an area being abandoned by shorebirds. We are also interested in learning the differences between areas with similar levels of disturbance that result in different levels of response by the shorebirds found there. In the long term, we would like to be able to track wether any changes in shorebird populations at the site level can be tied to the amount of human activity. All these questions can begin to be answered by simply counting the number of dogs, the number of people, the number of boats etc. So regardless of how many shorebirds you see, it would be valuable if the number of human activities could also be counted. Thank you to those of you who are already doing this. Often the easiest thing managers and planners can do to help conserve shorebirds, is to manage human activity. There are a handful of areas where this has already been shown to be effective, but more information is needed if we are going to be able to give decision makers improved recommendations of how and where to limit human activity around critical shorebird habitats. Growing the data set of human activity would be a good step in this direction.

Give threat scores a go. First, thank you to those of you who are filling out the threat scores. With the help of these scores we would like to be able to paint a picture of how shorebirds are threatened throughout Australia in order to report the location of different threats to decision makers. We now know what area on the ground was surveyed during any population monitoring survey, and we are finding an exceptional way to highlight to managers and other decision makers where locally we are most concerned about shorebird populations is to show them a map of count areas coloured according to the size of the local threats. This also highlights where and what needs further study regarding the factors thought to be driving changes in shorebird numbers within Australia.

Threat scores are admittedly subjective and imperfect in achieving as clear a picture as we would like, but we would argue they are sufficient to begin to generate the kinds of information that could point us in the right direction. Further, shorebird monitoring is not resourced sufficiently to collect detailed habitat data which could be used to quantify habitat change (we hope to rely on remote sensing of count areas for some of that in future). Similarly counters can not be expected to be collecting detailed data on the other known threats to shorebirds. Without something though we will not be able to let managers know what the likely threats are, and where threats need to be addressed. Finally, there are now well over 70,000 records in the database which makes it important to collect threats data in a way that can be extracted and summarised somewhat easily.

To get the total threat score we just add the timing, severity and scale scores to get a value of 0 to 9 (Table 1). If a threat is happening now timing scores a 3, and if the threat is likely to persist for more than 10 years severity scores a 3. Scale scores a 3 if on your visit >90% of the shorebirds you expect to see are not seen on your count. Each of these three measures of a threat relate to either Habitat Loss, Human Disturbance, Invasive Species, Pollution, or Water Levels.

Here are a couple of examples of how threat scores can improve the ease in which threats can be interpreted at the national level. On a count over summer you notice there are almost no birds in a count area that usually has thousands, and the reason appears to relate to a one-off beach marathon where hundreds of runners are strung out over the beach leaving no space for the birds to settle. Timing would score a 3 as it is happening now, scale would only score a one as this is not a problem that will persist, just a one off event in a remote and usually undisturbed area. Severity will score a 3 because you counted 90% fewer birds than you would have expected, for a total score of 7. In another count you've planned to go out on a weekday because the number of people, dogs chasing frisbees etc has gotten extreme on the week-ends. On a weekday you find there are still more people active than usual, and you find less than half the number of birds you would have expected hidden in a small patch of saltmarsh far from the beach. Again, human disturbance is happening now, so that scores a three, you feel the level of disturbance is likely to continue for 10 years at least as you score scale a 3, and because you saw between 50 to 90% of the number of birds you expected to see on the count you score severity a 2, for a total human disturbance score of 8. Threat scores of 8 or 9 suggest to us quickly which of the over 2000 count areas around the country have threats that are of greatest concern. Also, over time we get an understanding of which threats you the people who know these areas are most concerned about. Currently, human disturbance, water levels, and habitat loss are the three most highly scored threats in that order. We are also gaining an understanding of where these threats are growing. Please try to report the threat scores on each visit as possible.

THREATS	*Add timing, scale and severity scores to obtain a total threat score for each threat type*								
	TIMING		SEVERITY		SCALE		TOTAL THREAT SCORES	
	3 = Occurring now		3 = Will persist for >10 years		3 = >90% population decline		0-5 = Low threat	
	2 = Likely to occur within 1-3 years		2 = Will persist for 3-10 years		2 = 50-90% population decline		6-7 = Medium threat	
	1 = Likely to occur in >3 years		1 = Will persist for 0-3 years		1 = 10-49% population decline		8-9 = High threat	
	0 = Not occuring, not likely to in future		0 = Will not persist		0 = 0-9 % population decline			
HABITAT LOSS	☐	+	☐	+	☐	=	☐	
HUMAN DISTURBANCE	☐	+	☐	+	☐	=	☐	
INVASIVE SPECIES	☐	+	☐	+	☐	=	☐	
POLLUTION	☐	+	☐	+	☐	=	☐	
WATER LEVEL	☐	+	☐	+	☐	=	☐	

Possible breeding behaviour in Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, observed at Wilson Inlet, WA.?

--Geoff Taylor

Whilst sitting in the mud of Wilson Inlet, Denmark, on February 8th, 2010, attempting to photograph a small group of about twenty Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, I was witness to some interesting behaviour. One of the group assumed a very hunchback attitude, fluffing out its flight feathers, and even at times standing on tiptoe, and then commenced to pursue another bird. I assumed a possible territorial display over feeding rights, but then after the 'chaser' changed posture; tail erect, wings partly spread, neck stretched horizontal, head tilted up-

wards, and jumped onto the back of the other bird I realised what the fuss was all about. It looked like this Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was attempting to copulate, and whilst it remained on the bird's back for about 30-45 seconds, I did not observe any contact of cloacae. It was hardly an intimate experience for the birds involved, as within moments the other birds in the group had ceased their feeding and had surrounded the pair, showing great interest and animation. The whole episode only lasted a couple of minutes, and then they all quietly resumed their feeding.
I continued to observe them for some time afterwards, but no further unusual behaviour was observed.

After review of the photos by Chris Hassel and Danny Rogers it appears that both birds were the same sex, and the one jumping on top was first year bird based on the contrast it showed between old inner and fresh outer primaries.

Piersma et al. (1991) reported seeing “tail-up” displays in Red Knots staging in the Wadden Sea and north-west Iceland, and suggested that this indicated this reflected some kind of behavioural preparation for breeding. We are however not aware of any previous reports of apparent copulation on the non-breeding grounds.

Piermsa, T., I. tulp, Y. Verkuil, P. Weirsma and A Lindstrom. 1991. Arctic sounds on temperatre shores: the occurrence of song and ground display in knots Calidris canutus at spring staging sites. Ornis Scandinavica 22: 404-408.

If you have something you would like to include in the next newsletter, please send it to shorebirds@birdsaustralia.com.au

In the meantime keep up with some of the latest shorebird news at: http://www.shorebirds.org.au/news/ If you sign up on the right side of the website you will be notified of new postings.

Recently Shorebirds 2020 has said goodbye to Program Manager, Jo Oldland, who has moved on to a position with the Department of Sustainability and Environment. Technical Manager, Rob Clemens will also be departing in December, relocating with his family to sunny Queensland, where he will be working with the Queensland University team on an Arc Linkage Grant recently secured to investigate Flyway wide shorebird population trends. Both would like to take the opportunity to sincerely thank all the volunteers who helped build the program to where it is today – keep up the fantastic effort for our shorebirds!

With over 1300 contacts in our database it would be impossible to thank everyone, but on the next page are some of the people who we would like to acknowledge who made the outcomes of Shorebirds 2020 possible. Apologies if we have missed anyone.

David Adams, Jack Adams, Richard Alcorn, Laurel Allsopp, Peter Anton, Mark Antos, George Appleby, Richard Ashby, Rodney Attwood, George & Teresa Baker, Mike Bamford, Mark Barter, Pauline Bartels, Chris Baxter, Dawn Beck, Rod Bird, Stuart Blackhall, Matt Bloor, Anne Bondin, Jack & Pat Bourne, Adrian Boyle, Chris Brandis, Linda Brannian, Rob Breeden, Alan Briggs, Hazel Britton, Nigel and Mavis Burgess, Jeff Campbell, Graham Carpenter, Derek Carter, Mike Carter, Denis Charlesworth, Maureen Christie, Jane Cleary, Greg Clancy, Rohan Clarke, Simon Clayton, Jane Cleary, David Close, Chris Coleborn, Lisa Collins, Bob Cook, Jane Cooper, Ralph Cooper, Ricki Coughlan, Trevor Cowie, Phil Craven, Liz Crawford, Linda Cross, Peter Dann, Chris Davey, Wendy Davies, Kieth Davis, Frank Day, Alma de Rebeira, Xenia Dennett, Dave Donato, Peter Driscoll, Peter Duckworth, Phil Du Guesclin, John Eckert, David Edmonds, Glenn Ehmke, Len Ezzy, Rob Farnes, Winston Filewood, Shirley Fish, Tony Flaherty, Duncan Fraser, Barbara Garrett, Andrew Geering, Les George, Heather Gibbs, Alan Gillanders, Ken Gosbell, Doris Graham, Iva Graney, Travis Hague, Margaret Hamon, Ian Hance, Birgita Hansen, Sandra Harding, Judy Harrington, Ken Harris, Chris Hassell, Rick Hawthorne, Jane Hayes, Bruce Haynes, Bryan and Toni Haywood, Colin Heap, Chris Herbert, Ash Herrod, Tony Hertog, Marilyn Hewish, Janice Hosking, Dean Ingwersen, Roger Jaensh, David James, Chris James, Roz Jessop, Penny Johns, Steve Johnson, Arthur and Sheryl Keats, Cill Kinross, Marcel Klaasen, Wally Klau, Peter Langdon, Jenny Lau, John Lauri, Sharon Lehman, Michael Lenz, Ann Lindsey, John Lowry, Richard Loyn, Hans Lutter, Grainne Maguire, Sue Mather, Bernie McCarrick, David McCarthy, Tom McRaet, Peter Menkhorst, Ren Millsom, David Milton, Clive Minton, Euan Moore, Deane Morgan, Alan Morris, John Mullins, Tim Murphy, Vicki Natt, John Newman, David Niland, Gavin O'Brien, James O'Connor, Jan Olley, Kim Onton, Max O'Sullivan, Richard Owen, Priscilla Park, Lynn Pedler, Joy Pegler, Doug Phillips, Hugo Phillipps, Robyn Pickering, Chris Purnell, Rick Ressom, David Rohweder, Rosemary Payet, Robyn Pickering, Ivor Preston, Bianca Priest, Ken Read, Jim Reside, Danny Rogers, Ken Rogers, Dave Ryan, Toni Ryan, Dick Rule, Bill Russell, Bill Rutherford, Mike Schultz, Eric Sedgwick, Rob Shuckard, Bob Semmens, Marion Shaw, Paul Shelly, Andrew Silcocks, Donna Smithyman, Roger Standen, Simon Starr, Will Steele, Jonathon Stevenson, Ian Stewart, Phil Straw, Alan Stuart, Rob Tanner, Bryce Taylor, Ian Taylor, Susan Taylor, Rod Tetlow, Margie Tiller, Kent Treloar, Chris Tzaros, Len Underwood, Dave Warne, Paul Wainwright, Brian Walker, Doug Watkins, Toni Webster, Mike Weston, Gary Whale, Tom Wheller, Jim and Anthea Whitelaw, Bill and Evelyn Williams, Kelvin Williams, Eric Woehler, Jon Wren, Bill Wright, and Boyd Wykes.

When it seems like we're up against it – too little time, too little money and too many expectations, remember what Margaret Mead said:"Never be surprised that a small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has"

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