



## SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION PROTECTING SHOREBIRDS FROM INTRODUCED PESTS: The Corner Inlet Fox Control Project.



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Victorian Wader Study Group Inc.

### Where

Corner Inlet, located 200 km south east of Melbourne, is the most southerly area of tidal flats in mainland Australia. It is bounded to the north and west by cleared agricultural land and to the south by Wilson's Promontory National Park. At the eastern entrance to the inlet lie a series of barrier islands, tidal channels and mudflats. The conservation significance of Corner Inlet for shorebirds has been recognised and the area is listed as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar convention. Most of the barrier islands are covered by the Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Park and parts of the inlet have been recently declared as a marine park.



### The Birds

Due to its size, diversity of habitats and relatively low levels of disturbance, Corner Inlet is of outstanding significance to shorebird conservation on an international scale. Over 30 000 shorebirds use this area. The area is especially important for migratory species such as the eastern curlew, bar-tailed godwit, red knot and grey plover. Some of the more common resident shorebirds present include the pied and sooty oystercatcher. Corner Inlet has the highest concentration of breeding pairs of pied oystercatchers in Australia. Other birds breeding in the area include the caspian, crested and fairy tern and hooded plover.

### Who

The Victorian Wader Study Group (VWSG) consists of a team of approximately 100 dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers. The group was formed in 1978 and has been involved in long term banding and monitoring of migratory and resident shorebirds and terns. The objectives of the group are to build an accurate and comprehensive picture of shorebird biology and ecology in Australia, including gaining an understanding of migration routes, reproduction rates and monitoring of populations. The group has worked closely with state land management agencies, notably the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and Parks Victoria (PV).





Hooded plover chick.

### Problems and challenges

Due to their geography, the barrier islands of Corner Inlet do not suffer from human disturbance and habitat degradation to the same extent as some other shorebird sites closer to main population centres. That is not to say that shorebirds on these islands are immune to all threats. One of the most serious conservation issues facing shorebirds on these islands is predation by introduced animals, notably the red fox.

Fox predation is a major potential threat to shorebirds. Especially at risk are locally breeding species which nest on the ground such as the oystercatchers and the threatened hooded plover. While adult birds may be able to avoid foxes, eggs and young are vulnerable and continued predation can jeopardise the long term viability of populations.

The same geography which has protected the area from disturbance also presents major logistical challenges in terms of access. The islands can only be visited by boat, therefore access is limited by boat availability, weather conditions and suitability of tides. All these factors combine to present a small window of opportunity in which work and research can be carried out.

### Solutions

The barrier islands present unique opportunities for studying the impacts of fox predation on shorebirds. Some islands are fox free while others support fox populations. The Fox control project sought to eradicate foxes from some islands and to compare subsequent breeding success with islands known to be fox free.

The VWSG obtained funding through the Coastcare/Coast Action grants scheme (only available to community groups) to organise and carry out a fox-baiting program on several islands. Funds were used for the purchase of baits and to cover salaries of personnel carrying out the work. The program was carried out in close cooperation with DSE and PV, with the VWSG's role being to monitor the breeding populations and breeding success of shorebirds on the islands. The program commenced in 1997 and following three years of baiting, two of the islands were deemed to be fox free.

To determine whether the baiting program had a positive outcome for shorebird conservation, the VWSG conducted surveys of nesting success on an island which had recently become fox free (Dream Island) and on an island which had been fox free for several years (Box Bank).

Cooperation with DSE and PV has allowed members of the VWSG to gain access to a wide range of experts and professionals, as well as facilitating access to the islands. Without this partnership, the VWSG would not have been able to undertake the fox control program and likewise, the government agencies would not have had the resources to carry out the subsequent monitoring program which the VWSG has undertaken.

### Outcomes for the environment

- Foxes have been controlled and in some cases removed from areas of important shorebird habitat.
- A major threat to shorebirds has been reduced and, in some cases, eliminated.
- A regular monitoring program of bird numbers, breeding success and signs of fox activity is being conducted.

### Outcomes for the participants

- The cooperative relationship between the VWSG and state agencies has been reinforced.
- Participants have gained experience in a wide range of skills, including field skills, and communication, negotiation and planning skills through their involvement with this project.

### Measures of success

A wide range of information has been gathered by the VWSG, DSE and PV that can be used to measure how successful this project has been. Some of the outcomes which have been measured include;

- Over 700 fox baits were taken and it is estimated that over 230 foxes may have been destroyed.
- Evidence of foxes (e.g. footprints on beaches) has declined on islands which were baited.
- Following fox eradication, the number of Pied Oystercatcher nests found has increased.

More work needs to be carried out before the full extent of the success of this project is revealed. For example, it is still uncertain whether the increased numbers of nests found are an effect of reduced foxes or an increase in the observer's ability to find nests. It is unknown whether any of the chicks fledged successfully from the nests which were found and very few nests of other species, such as the hooded plover, were located.

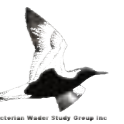


Sooty oystercatcher

### Future strategies and directions

For the project to be successful in the long term, a number of actions have been planned or proposed;

- PV will continue baiting, as there is a possibility that foxes may recolonise from the mainland, to ensure that cleared islands remain fox free.
- Alternative fox control methods may need to be trialed to eliminate the foxes which do not take baits.
- Monitoring of the breeding populations and nesting success of a range of bird species will continue in the long term.



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## Summary

This project has made an important contribution to shorebird conservation by;

Tackling a potentially difficult problem that poses a major threat to shorebirds.

Successful cooperation between state agencies and experienced volunteers.

Important objectives for the project in the future will be to;

Continue monitoring of fox numbers and activity on the islands and carry out control works as necessary.

Continue monitoring numbers and nesting success of shorebirds in the long term.

## Key contacts and groups

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Hooded plover adult

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