

HFNC Lake Linlithgow & associated wetlands excursion – report for 22 February 2015

Rod Bird

The morning was fine, calm and mild at first but heating up later. There were 6 people present (Rod & Diane, Dave & Lyn, Jane and a visitor (Greg Barber, leader of the Greens in Victoria) and we had an agreeable morning of bird-watching at Lake Bullrush and conversation about environmental issues.

Lake Kennedy: the lake was, as at the same time in 2014, bone dry and gleaming with salt later in the morning. A quick inspection found only ravens, magpies and 3 Whistling Kites there.

Lake Linlithgow: we met at 7.30 am at The Point. The lake had been dry since 23 December. The rainfall from August to end of January was 181 mm compared with the long-term average of 346 mm, a deficit of 52%. The rainfall for 2014 was 488 mm – the long-term mean is 680 mm. Other big wetlands – Brians Swamp, Bradys Swamp, Lake Buninjon & Lake Muirhead –were dry from mid January.

In the last 17 summers (Feb. 1999-Feb. 2015) the lake has been dry in 10 of those February visits. The most water seen in February of those 17 years was 80 cm in 2011, following 126 mm of rain in late December 2010 and 125 mm in January 2011. For those 17 years the average water depth in February was 0.136 m (range 0-0.8 m), compared with the previous run of 15-years (Feb. 1984 to Feb. 1998) when the average depth was 1.583 m (range 1.26-2.45 m), with no dry period in that run of years.

There were no waterbirds on the dry lake bed. We drove down to Boonawah Ck after visiting Lake Bullrush and Krauses Swamp and saw a pair of Crested Pigeons along the bank. Horsfield's Bushlarks were seen near the HFNC 1975 woodlot and the lane on 26 December – both new species for the lake. A Collared Sparrowhawk and 6 Golden-headed Cisticola were observed at Boonawah Ck.

Bullrush Swamp: In a departure from routine, we visited this wetland first, because it had water and birds to see. The lake was drying fast, with many areas of wet sand apparent across the southern and northern ends of the lake. The water covered about 75% of the lake bed, with a depth varying from 0 to perhaps 10 cm. We were treated to a great morning of bird-watching (see table of species). We expected to find Brolga there, for RB had seen 7 on 26 Dec. and JH recorded 14 on 24 Dec. and 19 on 4 Feb.



We viewed the birds from the south end (Chatsworth Rd) and off Mibus Lane at the northern end. The highlight was 45 Brolgas feeding on paddocks between the Bullrush and Lake Linlithgow. DM & LM checked numbers at Blackwood Swamp NW from Penshurst on their way home and counted 97 Brolga. JH had seen 102 birds there on 4 Feb. It seems, therefore, that the Bullrush flock is separate and possibly a 'new' flocking site.



The Brolga were distributed along the paddock bank and over the rise, with others on the margin of the lake and further along in the water. The two photos above show half of the birds seen.

Other species included Red-necked Stints, Red-capped Plovers, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Double-banded Plovers (2 early arrivals from New Zealand), Yellow-billed & Royal Spoonbills, and Black-winged Stilts. Ducks numbered about 7,000 birds (mostly Grey Teal) and there were about 1,100 Coots.

Harnath Swamp: The swamp was dry in 21 Dec. 2014. Harnath was last dry in Feb. 2009 but had water in Feb. 2010 (low, 75% cover), Feb. 2011-2013 (moderate depth, 90% cover) & Feb. 2014 (70% cover). The complex issue of the fencing of the road frontage has been resolved with some compromise. A positive has been that the landholder has fenced the southern boundary high on the bank, planted several rows of native trees along the bank and kept the sheep off the reserve.

Krauses Swamp: Birds were few, with only Masked Lapwing, Silver Gull and a few Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Brolga (see photo) and Black Swan. The water was quite shallow but extensive.

Tabor Swamp: this wetland was not visited because the levees had been breached by work in 2012 instigated by PV after a dubious complaint by a landholder of flooding. The approach should have been to adjust the flow around the ends of the levees, but the levee was cut over the drain. Consequently the whole area was dry on 30 Oct. 2014, no water being held in the ponds. The conditions for waders no longer exist there; John Harris's work was undone.

PV drew up a management plan for Tabor Wildlife Reserve in Nov. 2014, after a complaint of fire hazard by the local landholder whose sheep and cattle were found grazing the reserve in 2014. The levees when functioning had kept the 30 ha of the 48 ha reserve clear of grass. HFNC made a submission to PV about the situation, noting particularly that their draft plan had missed that vital point and that the function of the levees had to be restored.



PV's current plan is to 'trial' a grazing of 50% of the reserve and to restore the levees across the drain, acting on advice from GHCMA. The latter work was to begin this summer but the termination of the ranger position at Mt Eccles probably means that nothing will happen because ranger Gary Bellesini has been transferred. Unless restoration is undertaken there is little point continuing bird surveys there.

Soldiers Swamp, West Boundary Rd: this swamp was not visited, it having been dry since late January.

Waterbirds & Raptors of Lake Linlithgow & adjacent wetlands Feb 2015							
Wetland	LLinlit	LKene	Krause	Bullru	Harna	Soldie	Yatm
Observer	HFNC	HFNC	HFNC	HFNC	RB	RB	RB
Survey date	22Feb	22Feb	22Feb	22Feb	29Jan	13Jan	29Jan
Water depth (max.)	0	0	low	vl	0	vl	mod
Water % cover of area	0	0	80	70	0	70	80
Any waterbirds/shorebirds?	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
WATERBIRDS							
Australasian Shoveler				20			
Australian Shelduck				350			
Black Swan			4	600		1	15
Brolga			3	45			
Chestnut Teal				20		50	
Eurasian Coot				1100			5
Grey Teal				6000		350	
Pacific Black Duck				15			70
Pink-eared Duck				35			
Purple Swamphen							43
Royal Spoonbill				1			
Silver Gull			34	165			
Whiskered Tern				2			
White-faced Heron				22			10
Yellow-billed Spoonbill			2	14		2	1
SHOREBIRDS/WADERS							
Black-winged Stilt				16		70	
Double-banded Plover				2			
Latham's Snipe							2
Masked Lapwing			34	195		12	3
Red-capped Plover				110			
Red-necked Stint				215			
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper				17		30	
RAPTORS							
Australian Hobby						1	
Black-shouldered Kite				1			
Brown Falcon				1			
Collared Sparrowhawk	1						
Swamp Harrier				1			
Whistling Kite		3		2			
WETLAND-FRINGE SPECIES							
Golden-headed Cisticola	6						
Little Grassbird							1
White-fronted Chat				2			

Species not seen this year have been omitted from the table. The table includes 3 wetlands visited in January.



Red-necked Stints in non-breeding plumage (photo above).



Double-banded Plover in non-breeding plumage (above).

The photo below has Black Swan, Spoonbills & Lapwings on the SW side of Lake Bullrush.





Photos above and below are of Lake Bullrush at 8 am on 22 Feb 2015, with a view of the Grampians beyond. Each photo shows the shallows, now reflecting the situation across most of the lake. The Brolga, ducks, lapwings, plovers, sandpipers, silver gulls, stilts, stints, spoonbills and swans are enjoying the conditions while they last – and that may only be for another week or two.



About 48 Brolga were seen by RZ & YI to settle on Lake Bullrush at dusk on 26 Feb. and they were still there at first light next morning when JH & YI visited. They counted 45 birds, which were still on the edge of the wetland (the distant shore seen above) after sunrise at 7.15 am. An adjacent farmer, Mark Tonnissen, observed that the birds had been around Bullrush for 2 months, and that the low water level in the lake was at least partly the result of water extraction by the Shire for road-making purposes.