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## Nature Observations around The Cape



# Cape Chatter

## *Plover lover special ...recognizing a great season*

*Cape Chatter* No. 87 takes us back to the beach again, because that's where I have been spending a lot of my time, along with a team of dedicated volunteers under the auspices of Birdlife Australia, keeping an eye on our local *Hooded Plover* beach nesting birds. It has been a very successful season, with a *Hoodie* juvenile fledging at each of the four local Cape nesting sites monitored this season. With the breeding season now done until the coming Spring, this Issue gives a summary of the outcomes ... and explains some interesting facts about these resilient birds to further raise awareness within the community. A little bit of knowledge and understanding may help to secure the future of these birds from extinction.



Eggs are laid in a simple scrape on the upper beach or in a dune. Both parents incubate the eggs for 28 days.



As hatchlings, chicks are tiny, very fluffy with large legs relative to their body—like cotton balls on sticks! The parents do not feed them and they have to forage for themselves immediately at the waters edge, exposing them to predatory threats.



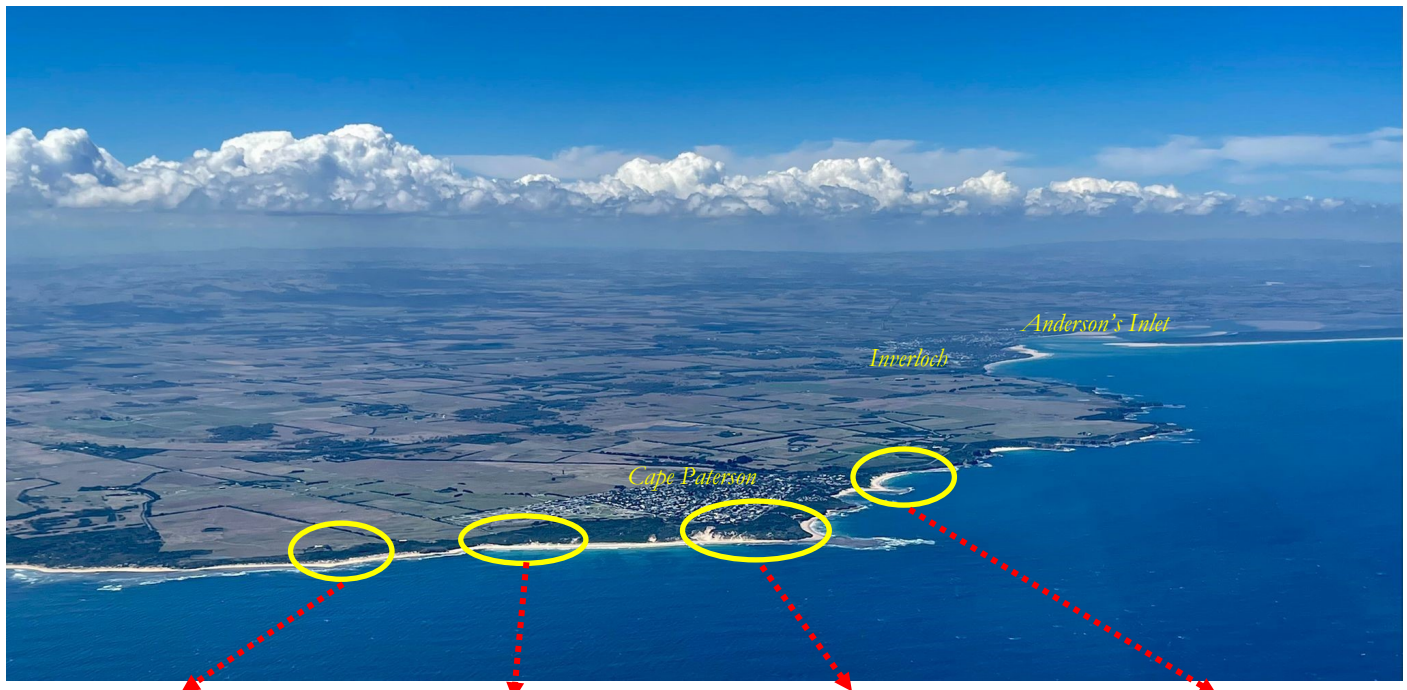
By 35 days, the bird is adult size and wing muscles have been strengthened for flight—time to fledge and be independent.



The parents spend most of their time protecting chicks from threats. Chicks grow rapidly and at about 3-4 weeks, are 3/4 size of the adult and have less fluffy plumage.

The breeding parents are exhausted by the end of the season. In spring, after developing a partnership and establishing a breeding territory, the adults may create several nest scrapes before selecting the 'right one'. Often nests with eggs fail, but if successfully established, there is a long road ahead: incubating and protecting the nest over 28 days; once the eggs hatch, they need to protect the brood from multiple threats for at least 35 days; and once the juvenile has fledged, it may stay around with the parents for a few more weeks before finding a new place to live. The adults will re-join other *Hoodies* and flock in small groups throughout the winter.

## 2022/23 Hoodie happenings in Cape Paterson??



### Wilson Rd 2nd Bay west end

Adults **White AW & DZ**

3 nests on upper beach, 2 failed.

Last 2 egg nest had 2 hatchlings 8 Feb 23

One chick lost after a few days.

One chick fledged at 35 days 13 Mar 23 and was banded **White DH** on 14 Mar 23.

Four fledglings previous 8 seasons.

### Wilson Rd 1st Bay west

Adults **White AS** and 'nb'

One nest with 3 eggs on dune east of F Break access track.

Nest had one hatchling on 17 Jan 23.

Adults and chick moved to west of Wilson Rd on 20 Jan 23 into the 1st & 2nd Bays.

Chick fledged at 44 days on 3 Mar 23.

One fledge here in previous 8 seasons.

[\* 'nb' is no band]

### 2nd Surf/Bommie

Adults **Orange RY** and 'nb'

One nest with 3 eggs in the dune blowout on 2nd Surf.  
3 chicks hatched 18 Jan 23.

Adults and 3 chicks moved to the 'bommie' between 1st and 2nd Surf, 20 Jan 23.

Two chicks vanished before 20 days.

Remaining chick fledged at 47 days on 6 Mar 23.

First juvenile to fledge here since Dec 2018 and the fourth since 2009.

### Pea Creek / Undertow Bay

Adults **Orange YW** and 'nb'

6 nests totalling 12 eggs.

Last nest had 2 hatchlings on 4 Feb 23. One egg was unviable.

One chick vanished at 25 days.

One chick fledged at 37 days, 14 Mar 23 and was banded

**White KU**.

**White KU** is the first fledge at this location since Dec 2012.

Since records began in 2004/05 nine juveniles have fledged here.

*Juvenile White DH @ 36 days*



*Juvenile from AS & 'nb', @ 50 days*



## *Some interesting Hoodie facts ... Q & A*

Hoodie volunteers often get asked some interesting questions on the beach when monitoring. Here are some of the more common questions we get ... and some answers!

### *How endangered are Hooded Plovers?*

In Victoria, they are listed as a vulnerable species, with just 700 adult birds left. In NSW, only 60 birds remain in the south of the state and they are critically endangered. The primary concern is that there are too few juvenile birds fledging to sustain the population into the future. Every fledgling is great news as it has a very good chance of making it to adulthood and breeding in the future.

**Right:** Lucky **Yellow 13!** A Phillip Island bird that calls the Cape coast home now. An egg has a 2.5% chance of becoming an adult!

### *Are breeding adults partners for life?*

No. Breeding adults pair up for the breeding season after spending the cooler months in flocks. Once paired the birds will establish a territory to nest in. They will defend this territory from other Hoodies who might try to muscle in. While pairs may stay together for some period of time, a newcomer may come on to the scene leading into the breeding season or if one of the adults dies.

**Below:** **White AW** and **White DZ** have been an established pair for several seasons and generally take-up a nesting territory west of Wilson Rd at Cape Paterson. They had a successful fledged this year—**White DH**.



*As an example, a touching Hoodie love story from one of our local volunteer monitors, Amaryl, this season ...*

*“Hoodies KK & JS are the Hooded Plover love story of recent years. JS was a regular nester at Waterfall Creek at Harmers Haven but lost his partner a year or so ago. He was a loner for a while last year, suffered from avian pox and had a resulting big lump on his left leg (at the heel joint). Eventually though, he found KK, also a loner, who had not only lost her partner but had also lost her right foot in a fishing line entanglement. KK & JS are now protecting their 3-egg nest at the Coal Point site.”*

**Footnote:** **KK** and her then partner were the resident pair at the site west of Wilson Rd that **White AW** and **DZ** took over several seasons ago and had **White DH**!!



### *How old do Hoodies live?*

An average of 14-15 years but some locals have been known to live for up to 22 years.

### *How long does it take a juvenile to reach adulthood?*

The juvenile plumage slowly develops into adult plumage over a 12 month period when it finally has the black hood, the bill is a distinctive red/black and the eye turns red from orange.

**Right:** Adult and juvenile birds.



## *Hoodie Q & A continued ...*



### *Can you tell the difference between the female and male adult?*

Not really, they both have the same plumage markings. Sex can be determined by blood analysis or observation of a banded bird when doing the deed!! Behaviourally, both sexes share incubation duties on the nest and protect the chicks after they have hatched, so by general observation, there is no obvious difference.



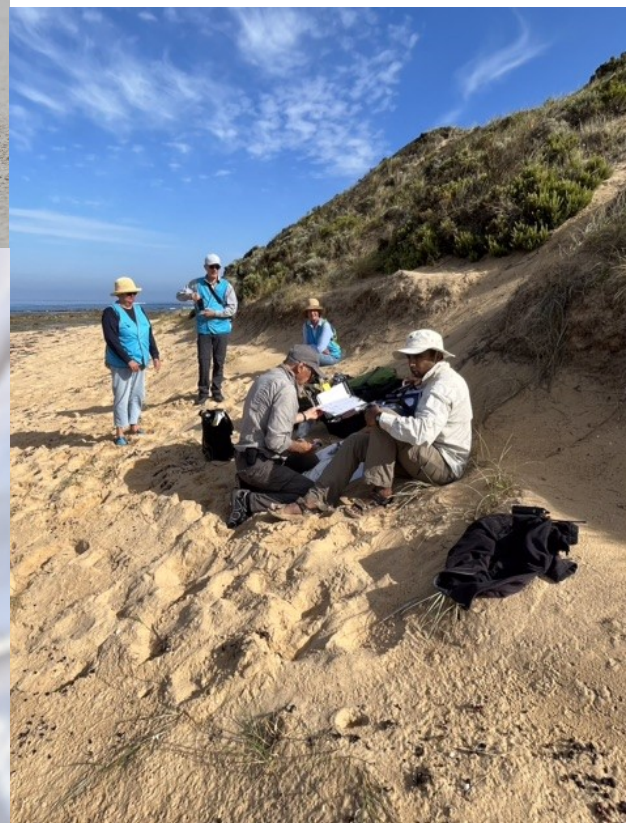
### *Are Hooded Plovers migratory?*

Hoodies are southern Australian based shorebirds (they are **not** intercontinental migratory birds). Most will stay locally, however, some have been known to move 200+ km from their natal territory. Along the Bass Coast, we have birds from Mornington Peninsula and Phillip Island, and some of our birds will move away to these territories as well, and possibly beyond.

**Left: Yellow 96** is a sub-adult bird that fledged from Smith's Beach on the southern side of Phillip Island in January 2022. **Y96** has been seen frequently along the Cape coast and among the various breeding sites over the 2022/23 summer. Maybe in the coming seasons it will find a partner and establish a nesting territory.

### *Why are some birds banded?*

Scientific research is a very important aspect in the conservation of *Hooded Plovers*. If the opportunity arises, juvenile birds from known parents are banded by experts from Birdlife Australia with an identification tag (a combo of letters & numbers) and metal bands. At the same time, the bird's health is checked, measurements recorded and a blood sample to determine sex. The banded birds can be identified and monitored under the auspices of Birdlife's Beach Nesting Birds program which involves 1500 volunteers covering 1650 sites and 15,000 observations per season across Australia. Along the Bass Coast, Hoodies are tagged with a **White** band (previously **Orange**) and birds from Phillip Island are tagged with a **Yellow** band.



## Hoodie Q & A continued ...



### Boy ... these Hoodies are dumb?

On the contrary, they are very intelligent, with quite extraordinary communication and protective distraction skills between adults and chicks. Examples include head-bobbing, calling, leading, vigilant guarding of the nest and broken wing displays to distract predators. These skills, and their cryptic (camouflaged) plumage and eggs have evolved over many thousands of years to thwart their natural predators. Unfortunately, their evolution has not kept pace with the impact of modern civilisation and the threats humans have introduced—most of which are manageable through behaviour change by us.

**Above Right:** During incubation, one of the adults will be on guard in front of the nest while the other is on the nest. If people get too close, the birds will attempt to lead you away, potentially exposing the eggs to smart predators like ravens who may be watching.

### What are the Hoodie's major threats?

They are up against a lot! Natural predators against eggs and chicks include magpies, ravens, raptors, and gulls. Since European civilisation of Australia, introduced feral animals such as fox and cats are big killers and now they face the challenges of coastal change from climate change, and expanding coastal developments which brings increased human recreational activities to the beaches.

**Left:** Along with raising community awareness, research into various deterrent devices against Hoodie threats such as ravens and fox are being conducted in the hope they will provide important management tools in improving egg and chick survival rates.



### What is the Hooded Plover habitat?

Our Hoodie's live on high energy ocean beaches and use sandy beaches, dunes and rock platforms. They have preferred nesting sites during the breeding season and also flocking sites during the non-breeding season which are known to volunteer observers. They lay eggs in a simple scrape on the beach above the high tide mark and also in dunes in locations which provide clear visibility of approaching threats. On high tides, these nest are vulnerable to inundation and being stood on and crushed. Walking through dunes also has a major impact on the birds nest and causes erosion, while invasive weeds limit lines of sight.



**Above and Right:** White AS and partner's nest on a dune face east of the F Break beach access this season was in a great spot away from people and dogs with good visibility along the beach to see what threats were approaching. Still, only one egg hatched—there were many fox prints, ravens and magpies detected in this location.



## Hoodies Q & A continued ...

*We have Hoodies on the farm ... and I've seen them at the airport?*

Not likely. Local species of the *Hooded Plover* are shorebirds and would never leave their beach habitat. (It is different in WA where that sub-species venture into inland wetlands). Many people think the *Hooded Plover* is the same as the *Masked Lapwing* (aka *Masked* or *Spur-winged Plover*) and wonder what the fuss in protecting them is all about! *Masked Lapwings* (**pictured right**), a common bird which can be seen on beaches, are much bigger birds and can be very aggressive when protecting nests and chicks, more so than the *Hoodie*—which is more into distracting the threat. But *Hoodies* will aggressively defend against predatory birds and other *Hoodies* who try to muscle into their territory.



*I saw quite a few Hoodies together down the beach just then?*

Maybe, but there are several other plover species that can sometimes be easily confused with *Hooded Plovers*. Along the Bass Coast, these are the *Red-capped Plover* **pictured below**, (like the *Hoodie*, a resident Aussie beach nesting bird) and the *Double-banded Plover*, **pictured left**, a winter time migrant from the New Zealand South Island. Can you spot the difference? The *Hoodie* is more easily identified with the adult black cap, the white nape behind the head and the orange/red eye ring.



*What does a successful breeding season look like?*

Any fledged juvenile *Hoodie* is a great achievement given the odds that are stacked against them and the threats they face.

In the Cape Paterson area this season, the **four** fledged juveniles have way exceeded the expectations. Since records began in 2004/05 at Cape, **23** juveniles have fledged over the **18** years. This years result alone represents a significant contribution to the number of new birds to the population.

Along the entire Bass Coast this season, (not including Phillip Island), as at 21 March 2023, there have been **20** confirmed fledged *Hoodies* with the potential for a couple more. The long term seasonal average is **12** juveniles and to put it in perspective, last year there were only **5** fledged birds in total.

There will be many factors contributing to the success of this season and this result is no guarantee that the same numbers will fledge next year. What we do know is that raising community awareness, positive behavioural change among beach users, more monitoring by volunteers and scientific research to manage some of the threats, has an impact. And maybe of course, a dose of good luck.

**Right:** One of the 'miracle' juveniles faced many challenges to reach fledgling age between the busy 1st and 2nd Surf beaches—the development took a total of 75 days!!



## What do Hoodie volunteers do??

During the non-breeding season from April to September, volunteers will monitor *Hoodie* flocks and note what banded birds are in the area.

As the breeding season begins—so does the busy time! Observation checks ramp up at known nesting sites, looking for breeding pairs that have formed and potential first scrapes along with nests with eggs. Once nests are confirmed, volunteers erect roped enclosures and signage as management tools to alert the public of the existence of breeding and what people can do to help the *Hoodies*. Hatching of chicks brings more observations and monitoring along with engaging with beach users on the what is happening. If a chick is lucky enough to fledge as a juvenile, the volunteers may be honoured to assist experts in more scientific research during the banding process. The enclosures then come down, equipment is refreshed and stored ... then onto the next cycle. All the while, volunteers enter their observations into *Birdlife Australia's Hoodie Data Portal* which underpins the scientific research into protecting this species. It is a most rewarding experience.

If you are interested in helping local volunteers in the conservation of our wonderful little *Hooded Plovers* as part of the **Friends of the Hooded Plovers Bass Coast**, you can find out more and sign up at **Birdlife Australia's** beach nesting bird hub at <https://beachvol.birdlife.org.au/>. Every little bit of support will help in protecting these amazing birds.

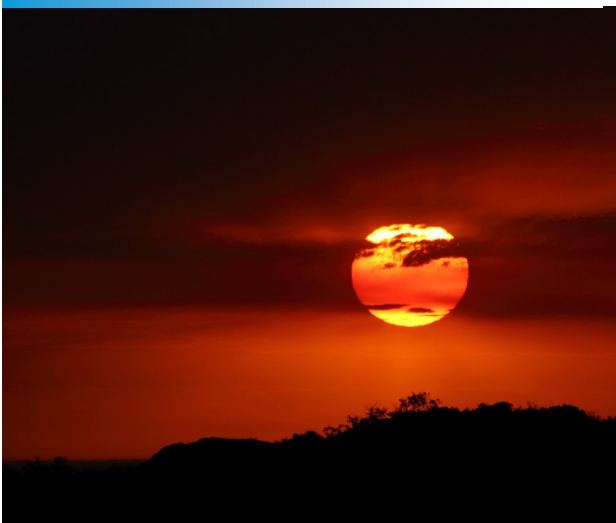
Volunteer Hooded Plover monitors are trained citizen scientists who work under the auspices of Birdlife Australia which is responsible for the Beach Nesting Program designed to help conserve Australia's beach nesting shorebirds.



It is a privilege and rewarding experience to observe the development of a juvenile *Hoodie* from egg through to chick and finally the fledged, independent bird in a process that takes between 63-70 days—a contribution that will hopefully preserve the species.



## Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Feel free to contact David by email or through the website to report any nature observations at **The Cape**.

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