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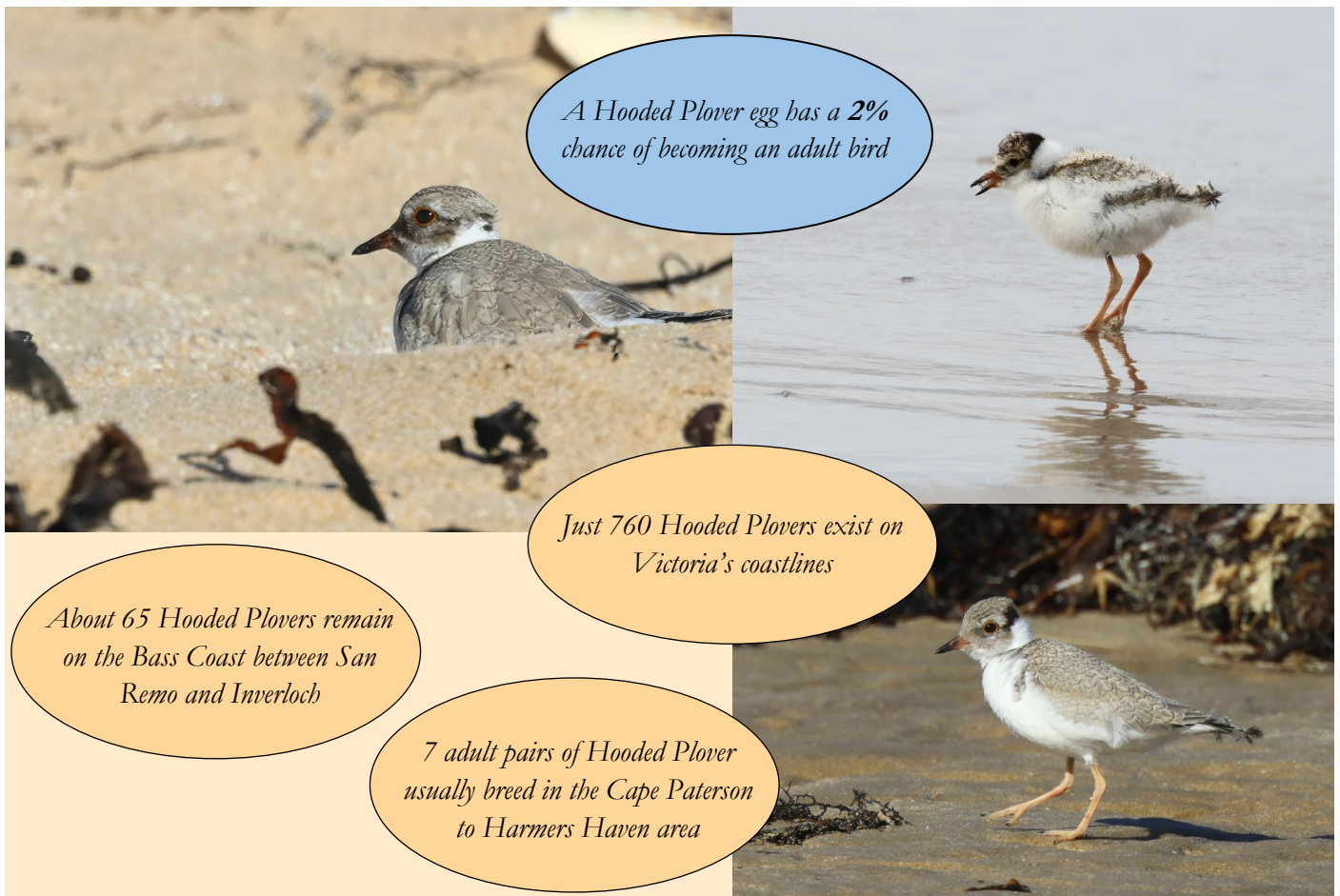
Cape Chatter

Bass Coast to Surf Coast ... EZ does it!!

A special Hooded Plover edition

We are now into the new breeding season of the vulnerable, local beach-nesting bird, the *Hooded Plover*, a bird that has one of the lowest breeding success rates in the world. So it is timely, again, to raise awareness of what remarkable birds these are, the challenges they face, and what we can do as caring and sharing human beings to help in their survival so they are not added to the list of critically endangered Australian birds ... a list that is sadly getting longer as time goes by.

One of the joys of volunteering to monitor and help the *Hooded Plover* conservation effort, is watching a bird evolve from a tiny, well camouflaged egg on the beach, feeding itself as a chick from day one, through to fledging as a juvenile, then growing into a sub-adult and onto full adulthood. Hopefully one day, such young birds will breed and do their bit toward sustaining the threatened *Hoodie* population. It is a remarkable achievement—some are miracles. I would like to share the life story so far of one such bird, **White EZ** (as in **easy**—and it is not!) to see the challenges these birds face.



A Hooded Plover egg has a 2% chance of becoming an adult bird

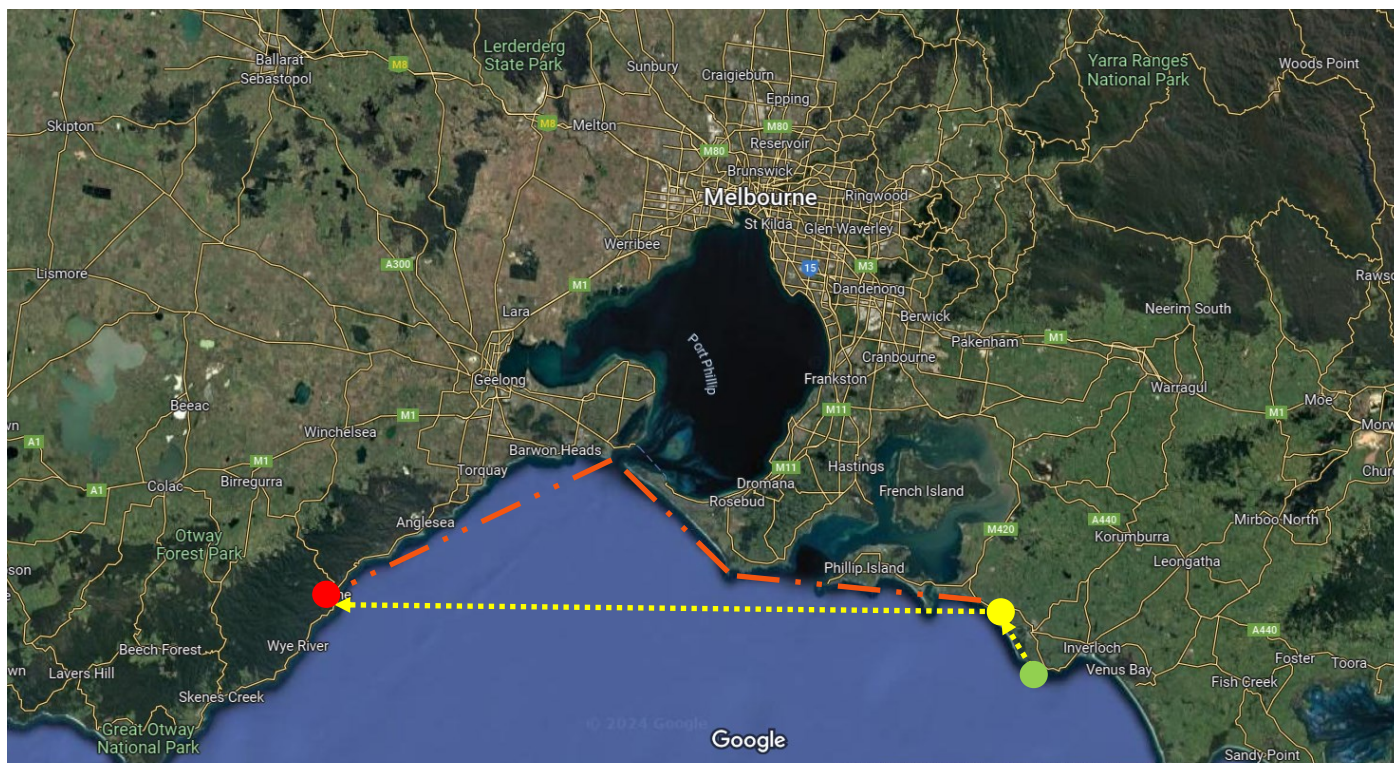
Just 760 Hooded Plovers exist on Victoria's coastlines

About 65 Hooded Plovers remain on the Bass Coast between San Remo and Inverloch

7 adult pairs of Hooded Plover usually breed in the Cape Paterson to Harmers Haven area

Bass Coast to the Surf Coast

The **one** fledgling from the Cape Paterson coastline last season was recently reported all the way over on Victoria's Surf Coast. **White EZ***, who hatched at the Pea Creek estuary breeding site in Cape Paterson was seen at Lorne on Victoria's Surf Coast—145 km away 'as the crow flies' in a straight line. Assuming it did not venture to far away from the coastline, flying near Phillip Island, the Mornington Peninsula, the Bellarine Peninsula and then down the Surf Coast, the flying distance is much longer. While not quite in the league of inter-continental migratory shorebirds who travel many thousands of kilometers between hemispheres, for a *Hoodie*, this is some achievement and demonstrates one tough and determined little bird searching for a new territory to make it's home.



Above: The journey path **White EZ** would have taken in a direct line is 145 kms but more likely it may have followed the coastline?

* Some *Hooded Plovers* are flagged and banded for research purposes allowing scientists and monitors to track the birds location, health, and breeding fidelity. The coloured flag fitted locally are **White & Orange** with two unique, identifying characters. **Yellow** flags are used on nearby Phillip Island and birds from there sometimes relocate to our coast.

This year, a Management Plan based on the last 10 years observation history of nest sites and Hooded Plover breeding pairs was completed for the area between Inverloch and Harmers Haven, which includes Pea Creek. This plan provides all Hoodie stakeholders with vital information for managing the birds habitats and key threats.





The Management Plan, completed by BirdLife Australia, was generously funded by **The Cape** sustainable housing estate as part of its conservation strategy. The facts used in this story are real, based on monitor observations and other data is extracted from the Management Plan.







The Pea Creek breeding site and a bit on the parents

White EZ hatched from a clutch of eggs to *Hooded Plover* breeding pair **Orange YW** and **White UV** at Cape Paterson's Pea Creek estuary. This breeding site is heavily disturbed by humans as it sits near a caravan park, is adjacent to the popular Cape Bay (family) Beach, it's on a popular beach walk along Undertow Bay and near a rocky point busy with fishers and beach fossickers. The breeding history of the site for the past 10 seasons is shown **right**—it is not great, but fairly typical for *Hoodies*. Only **2.8%** of all the **71** eggs reached juvenile (fledge) bird status, that is, when a young bird can fly and fend for itself!

PEA CREEK & UNDERTOW BAY
HISTORY OF ORANGE YW & WHITE UV

NUMBER OF BREEDING SEASONS	NUMBER OF EGGS	NUMBER OF CHICKS	NUMBER OF FLEDGE
			
6	59	10	2

PAST 10 YEAR BREEDING HISTORY
2014 -2024

NUMBER OF BREEDING SEASONS	NUMBER OF EGGS	NUMBER OF CHICKS	NUMBER OF FLEDGE
			
10	71	12	2

The adult parents

Adult *Hoodies* **Orange YW** (a 9 year old male) and **White UV** have been the resident breeding pair at the Pea Creek site since the 2018/19 season. In that time, they have nested **24** times. The breeding history of the pair is shown **left**.

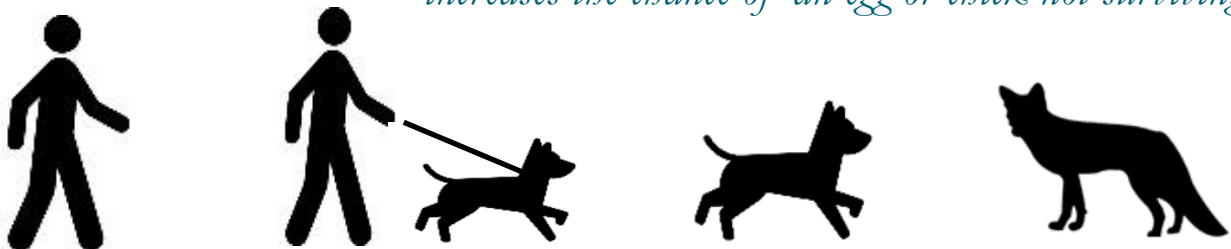
Remarkably (more a miracle), the pair have had a fledge in each of the past two seasons—the only **two** in the past **10** seasons and **two** of the **five** that have fledged since records began in 2006/07.

Their 'success' in the past two seasons has brought their breeding success percentage of eggs reaching fledge status to an 'astronomical' **3.3%** ! Still a sobering number.



Above: **Orange YW** (left) and **White UV** (right) have become very adaptable birds at this busy breeding site and are constantly managing and moving the chicks around the habitat as they face the various threats.

Every threat is a disturbance, and every disturbance increases the chance of an egg or chick not surviving.



Three eggs = three chicks ... then there is hope they survive



THE NEST

Hooded Plovers lay 2-3 well camouflaged eggs over several days in a simple scrape in the sand, usually on the upper beach or in a dune area. The nest is located so they have a clear line of sight to observe any oncoming threats.

INCUBATION

It takes 28 days of incubation by both parents, in shifts, for the eggs to hatch. When not incubating, one of the parents is feeding but is always vigilant and guarding the nest from any threats.



HATCHING

The chicks hatch within hours of each other, have enough sustenance to last several hours but then must begin feeding themselves by scurrying around the beach after invertebrate prey. Immediately, they are very vulnerable and the parents are kept busy protecting them.



PARENTING

The parents use distraction techniques to protect the chicks. If they see any threats, they communicate with the chicks to hide (they are well camouflaged) and will attempt to lead the threat away. But out in the open, when feeding, they are most at risk.



Chicks, 2 days old, hiding on the beach behind sand mounds

What happened with the White EZ clutch?

This clutch discovered on 13th December 2023, was the third nest in the season for **Orange YW** and **White UV**. Their two previous one-egg nests were unsuccessful, one lost to a weather event and one from an unknown cause.

DAY 1

On 13th January 24, the three chicks hatched. The first 10 days are critical for their survival—they are extremely small, require brooding, and if they become isolated out in the open, they can die from overheating and are susceptible to predators. On Day 10, the first chick was lost, most likely from fox, raven or gull predation



DAY 24

On 6th February, another chick disappeared. This picture left was the pair at 20 days. The chicks would have been roaming more widely to forage, but still very much under the watchful eye of the parents. Fox were quite prevalent and off leash dogs were reported chasing birds around this period.



DAY 31

With around 4 days left to fledging age, the parents started moving the one remaining chick more widely, away from the busy Pea Creek area toward the more open beach of Undertow Bay. Fox remained a problem, and Parks Vic instigated some fox eradication measures.



DAY 35

For some reason, the chick, now 'officially' a fledge at Day 35 and classed as a juvenile, decided to stay around the natal territory with its parents, continuing to roam widely to rest and forage, but it was not seen flying any significant distance, so it was still vulnerable to being attacked on the ground.



White EZ ... the journey continues

DAY 55

With the young bird still around, it gave BirdLife Australia the chance for the bird to be banded for research purposes and on 7th March 24, at Day 55, it became known as White EZ. It was last reported on its natal territory on 16th March, and now 64 days old, was ready to spread its wings and discover a whole new world!



White EZ was released by volunteer monitors after experts banded it. The vols had been tracking its development for 83 days.

DAY 64

White EZ finally found its way to a popular winter flocking site, the Powlett River Mouth near Kilcunda, joining other adult and juvenile Hoodies. It was reported here between early April and early September. And then on 8th October, an observant monitor reported it at Lorne, all alone, and a long way from home.



Above: White EZ was photographed by volunteer monitor, Hendrick Prins, at the Powlett River Mouth on 7th September 24, now around 8 months old and displaying its sub-adult plumage.

Unfortunately, we do not have a picture of White EZ at Lorne, but I know the passionate Hoodie volunteer monitors and staff of the Great Ocean Road Authority will be keeping an eye for it over there.

The key threats faced by the birds

Volunteer Hooded Plover monitors regularly observe Hooded Plovers and report their sightings into a scientific research data base managed by BirdLife Australia. As part of their reporting, they assess the threats within a **100 m** arc of a Hooded Plover nest or chick site. This distance is based on research which has determined the flight initiation distance of the birds ie when an adult bird is disturbed and therefore exposes both the eggs or chicks to predators which can lead to egg and chick loss.

On the next page, from the *10 Year Recovery Management Plan*, I have extracted the 10 year data for **White EZ's** Pea Creek natal site, to give an idea of the type of key threats the bird faced in getting from an egg to a successful fledged juvenile. Once a juvenile can fly, it is very likely to make it adulthood and help sustain the breeding population

The types of threats faced by White EZ at Pea Creek



87%

People getting too close to nests and chicks is the biggest threat.

Breeding sites are rope enclosed and approach signs established with advice on what you can do to help protect the *Hoodies*. It is best to stay well away from the roped areas which are put in place to give them space and therefore cause less disturbance and stress.



38%

Disappointingly, dogs roaming the beaches off leash are the second key threat to the *Hoodies*. The Pea Creek/Undertow site is regulated as a **DOG ON LEASH** at all times area, but compliance is very low based on the data and anecdotally. Research indicates that dogs off leash causes high rates of disturbance to the adults and chicks (and sometimes predation of eggs and chicks).



29%

Research into disturbance of the birds also indicates a **DOG ON LEASH**, if it gets too close to a nest or chick site, causes a similar reaction from the birds as if the dog was not on a leash.

Keeping your dog on leash a reasonable distance away from roped enclosures and when you have visual sightings of the birds can reduce the disturbance and cause less stress on the birds and chicks.



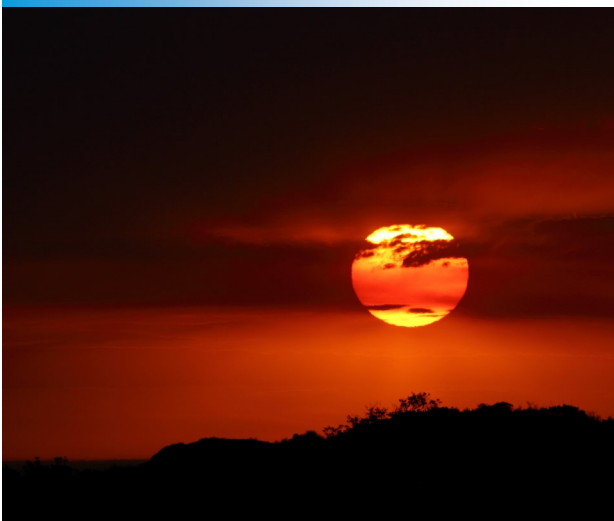
27%

Introduced *Red Fox* are a key predator against a range of native wildlife and a significant source of loss of *Hoodie* eggs and chicks, although we are only usually guided by fox footprints near nests and chick sites as we do not normally see the fox in action. Eradication programs are underway targeting the known fox areas, such as Pea Creek, but it remains a difficult problem to control.

Other threats include predation by raptors, gulls, raven and magpies along with wandering and feral cats.

It has been quite a journey for White EZ to have got this far in it's life. It is a tough little bird, facing many challenges, but it's on the way!

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.

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