

HFNC Lake Linlithgow & associated wetlands excursion - report for 24 February 2013

Rod Bird

A good morning was had at the wetlands, with 7 people present (Rod, Diane, John, Glenys, Dave, Lyn and Jane).

Lake Kennedy: 2 members made a brief survey of LKEN from 7.00-7.30 am. The lake was bone dry, salt gleaming on the surface. A few Magpies were seen on the surface but no waterbirds or waders were seen.

Lake Linlithgow: we met at 7.30 am at the Cypress/Pines at the SW corner of the bay on Chatsworth Rd. This was the first count area and many birds could be seen.

We then moved on to The Point at LLIN where a scan of most of the remaining area of water was made with spotting scopes. The marker showed 1.60 m, indicating a max. depth of water in the lake of 0.3 m. It was estimated that water only covered about 33% of the lake surface. The conditions were ideal for many waders but there was also a surprising number of Black Swan (1000), ducks (1020), Hoary-headed Grebe (550) and Eurasian Coot (13,000). Of the ducks, Pink-eared Duck (400), Chestnut Teal (400) and Grey Teal (150) were the most numerous, with a few Australian Shelduck (30) and Australasian Shoveler (40). No other ducks were seen. At The Point we saw 11 Black-tailed Native Hens.

All except Jane then drove around the east side, stopping several times to count the birds, the last stop being at Boonawah Ck. We took a short walk out onto the lake and observed flights of Red-necked Stint and Stilts. Jane went around to North Lake Rd and walked out on the lake to count waders near the centre. The sky in the area of linseed cropland adjacent to the NE corner of LLIN was alive with Whistling Kites (49), Brown Falcon (15), Swamp Harrier (2), Nankeen Kestrel (1) and Black-shouldered Kite (2). After a brief stop at Krauses Swamp we continued on to North Lake Rd and met Jane at the Boat Ramp (near the John Harris memorial plaque).

Waders of note were: Black-winged Stilt (700), Banded Stilt (140), Red-necked Avocet (6), Red-necked Stint (2,500), Red-capped Plover (520), Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (240), Masked Lapwing (340) and Double-banded Plover (20). The extraordinary number of Red-capped Plovers should be remarked on; without walking into the lake the number of birds observed would have been a tenth of that reported, and no Double-banded Plovers would have been seen. Remarkable also is the number of Red-necked Stints, indicating once again how important the inland lakes are to the migrant waders. The annual Shorebird 2020 survey conducted a week earlier in the Port Fairy area showed very few Sharp-tailed Sandpipers or Red-capped Plovers on the beaches or adjacent swamps, so the numbers seen at LLIN indicate that those species may have been working the drying inland lakes.

Over the last 15 summers LLIN has been dry on 9 occasions during our excursions in February, a run of 6 dry years ending in Feb 2011. The most water seen in February was 80 cm in 2011, 45 cm in 2002 & 2012, 42 cm in 1999, 30 cm in 2013 and 14 cm in 2004. Contrast that with a 15-year run from Feb. 1984 to 1998 when the range was 0.85 m (1998) to 2.45 m (1993) and the average 1.58 m depth.

Krauses Swamp: Birds were few, with Australian Shelduck (33), Grey Teal (23), Masked Lapwing (70), Silver Gull (26), Red-necked Stint (10) and White-faced Heron (1). On the previous day 3 Common Greenshanks and 9 Red-kneed Dotterel had been seen. The swamp had a water cover of about 50%.

Harnath Swamp: The water level was still quite high; Grey Teal (580), Hardhead (120), Freckled Duck (4), Hoary-headed Grebe (160), White-faced Heron (20), Eurasian Coot (220), Black Swan (15), Red-necked Avocet (14) were the only sightings of particular note. We noted that a fence is being constructed between the road and the lake.

Bullrush Swamp: This was the next stop and was significant for Black Swan (2,900), Eurasian Coot (18,000), Freckled Duck (50 or more), Pink-eared duck (440), Australasian Shoveler (110), grey teal (400), Hardhead (50), Chestnut Teal (40), Pacific Black Duck (12), Musk Duck (1), Straw-necked Ibis (43), Black-winged Stilt (6), masked lapwing (5). The presence of the endangered Freckled Duck was particularly noteworthy. This swamp has been deep enough, and with little 'weed', for power boats to use this summer. The water level is at about 90% capacity.

Soldiers Swamp on West Boundary Rd: Two of our party completed the day (at 1.30 pm) here. The surface was dry, with water only in the small dam. We saw Australian Shelduck (50), Grey Teal (10), White-faced Heron (16) & Masked Lapwing (28), almost all around the small dam.

Tabor Swamp: this was not visited. A subsequent visit (28 Feb) found it to be dry with water only in 3 small pools in the drain and no waterbirds were seen. John Harris's levees across the drain had been recently partially breached. An enquiry revealed that landholders had complained about flooding and PV had been required to modify the system.