

Community conservation project wins award in Oz

Title Birds Australia (BirdLife Partner) has won the 'Natural Environment' category of the Victorian Coastal Awards for its Beach Nesting Birds project, which has recruited local communities and land managers to improve the breeding success of the Near Threatened Hooded Plover *Thinornis rubricollis*. The Awards recognise individuals, community groups, committees of management, projects and businesses that have demonstrated a commitment to protecting and enhancing Victoria's coastal or marine environments. Endemic to Australia, the Hooded Plover acts as a flagship for serious coastal issues. 'Hoodies are an excellent indicator of healthy beaches where recreation is balanced with coastal needs', said Dr Grainne Maguire - Beach-nesting Birds Project Manager. Before the Beach Nesting Birds (BNB) project was set up, annual surveys in Victoria showed that young birds only accounted for a small proportion of the population, suggesting that the greatest threat to this species is low breeding success. Unfortunately, the species's breeding season coincides with the peak in the summer holiday season, when human presence on beaches is at its highest. 'Continued poor breeding success would mean we lose this species in the future', said Dr Maguire. 'We are turning this around by empowering community groups through the BNB project to monitor breeding, and to recognise threats and manage them.' She says beach-nesting birds would stand no hope if it were down to a handful of people working to recover their population. 'They rely on an integrated and broad scale effort in Victoria, inclusive of all coastal residents, beach goers and land managers, to make a difference.'



Regional coordinator of Friends of the Hooded Plover Bass Coast group, Stephen Johnson, holding two chicks (credit: Grainne Maguire).

Birds Australia has set up 'Friends of the Hooded Plover' regional groups along the Victorian coast, at Far West Victoria, Mornington Peninsula, Apollo Bay, Anglesea, Breamlea, Bellarine Peninsula, Bass Coast and Venus Bay. In 2010, the BNB project delivered workshops to many of these groups on monitoring and finding nests. 30 new volunteers have since joined, and these and most of the existing 250 volunteers have been given field training. Nest site management activities include targeting beach users in an education and awareness campaign, physically fencing and signing nest sites, developing signage for beach access points, fencing dune systems, controlling sea spurge, and using nest cameras to identify nest predators to provide advice for predator control. Among the BNB project's achievements are the coordination and completion of the 2010 biennial count, with more coverage than in any other year. 'Results show that we have increased the hoodie population in Victoria, and that it is now closer to 500 birds than 400 as in the 2008 and 2006 counts', Dr Maguire says. 'Last season's production of 60 fledged chicks is double that of any other season, and shows the project is working.' The Friends of the Hooded Plover groups will continue beyond the life of the project, to ensure the birds have a secure future. 'This is already evident. These groups are becoming self-sufficient, and are absolutely amazing, seeking their own grants, coming up with new ideas for community education, and tackling broader coastal issues that go to show hoodies are truly a fantastic indicator of beach health.'