South Coast Fleurieu Update

Sue Thornton, Volunteer Regional Coordinator, Friends of the Hooded Plover Fleurieu Peninsula (Tunkalillia to Goolwa)

Our South Coast shores were invaded with a Toxic Algal Bloom, presenting with thick creamy foam coming, at times, up onto the dunes, leaving a dry Khaki residue, after about 24 hours.

The Algal Bloom spread to Kangaroo Island and up into the Adelaide and Southern Metro beaches in the last few months.

Algal Bloom foam on Sheepies Beach. Photo: Tim Bright.

Sheepies beach before algal bloom (taken from opposite end). Photo: David Thorn.

The 2025/26 Hooded Plover Breeding season has been fraught with difficulties and differences.

Difficulties:

The Algal Bloom can cause stinging eyes and sore itchy throats producing coughing, when people walk affected beaches, therefore any volunteers surveying our Hoodie sites could be subject to this problem. The symptoms disappear after a couple of days.

Differences:

Through winter we had flocks of up to 25 Hoodies arriving on our Victor Harbor sites, mainly at our Yilki site at Encounter Bay. Many of these Hoodies were from our remote sites. Usually, the remote Hoodies tend to make up flocks on the remote beaches. We suspect foraging was difficult on remote beaches, due to the algal bloom.

After consulting a local marine expert, we tested the swash area sand at several sites and did find live organisms on urban beaches but we didn't have a base line for comparison.

Late August saw our first two nest attempts for the South Australian Hooded Plover 2025-26 Breeding Season. We have gone on to have seven nest attempts, only one hatching chicks. Ravens have been devastating, taking the eggs from the other attempts, which was confirmed via camera evidence.

Sleeve used to cover the Foxwatch devices to help protect them from the ravages of salt and sand. Photo: David Thorn.

We are trialling the ultrasonic Foxwatch devices in an array of three, spread across the fenced area with a camera. The devices have now got half metre sleeves over them, pushed into the sand for protection from sticky salt and sand. They are monitored every seven days, checking to see if they are working and are effective as a fox deterrent. We consider they do deter foxes and hopefully the ravens have finished feeding their young and will disperse enough to allow our Hoodie eggs to hatch.

We have had many changes of Hoodie pairings and our Hoodies seem very unsettled with single Hoodies without partners on some sites and flocking occurring on some beaches.

The Central Victor Site, (Oliver's Reef Section) became quite a saga. Our staunch veteran PX white (right) male and partner, have over past seasons fledged many chicks but in May 2025 his partner could not be found and in early August PX teamed up with ZE white (right). This pair had one of our first nest attempts which failed after sixteen days of incubation due to ravens.

Matings were seen with this pair leading up to their second attempt and an egg laid, ZE now was the only Hoodie seen and much to our sorrow, PX has not been seen again. KP green male had taken over PX's role and hoped to team up with ZE. At this point ZE laid her second egg, (presumably PX's genes). KP was often seen trying to mate with ZE but she would have none of it. KP was seen making scrapes to tempt ZE but no. ZE finally put her third egg in with the first two and commenced incubation, no doubt hoping that KP would do his share. He was often seen fussing around the nest but never incubating. We did wonder if ZE would be able to do all the incubation, as when volunteers visited ZE was always on the nest. Incubation lasted 8 days with ravens taking the eggs. This pair have since split up, ZE moving off, leaving KP at Olivers to find another partner.

Generally, not a very happy snapshot of our season's start 😟.

Yorke Peninsula Happenings

Felicity Hoff, Volunteer, Friends of the Hooded Plover Yorke Peninsula

This season started earlier than usual for my resident Hoodies in Galway Bay laying their first egg in their first nest attempt for the season, in early September. All 3 eggs have now been laid and incubation is well underway. Although the weather has been very windy, they are still soldiering on, being the ever-resilient little birds, we have come to know and love! This season may well be very challenging as our beaches at the bottom of Yorkes have been severely battered by wind and waves during winter, no doubt a significant problem which sadly, is common to many Australian beaches. Our beach has lost many thousands of tons of sand and an enormous amount of dune vegetation, leaving the dunes having been significantly eroded. Will this impact our birds? I noted the first scrape has been placed further up the beach and closer to the new dune base than was the case in previous years. This was fortuitous as recent storms got within millimetres of the nest! Sadly, though when the eggs were due to hatch they went missing. Given no raven prints in the area but having seen some feral cats, it's highly likely the chicks did hatch but were taken by the cats.

Galway Bay dune erosion extending from the seaweed line to remaining vegetation line. Photo: Felicity Hoff

Blue line depicts how close the storm tide got to the Hoodie's nest. Photo: Felicity Hoff.

Meantime, our pair in Galway Cove don't have a nest on the go and given the earlier scrapes seen and my absence for a couple of weeks, I suspect they did have their first attempt which has already failed. It really underscores the need for volunteers to erect fences and signage. Perhaps if I had been available and put up the signage and fencing the nest would still be viable, as was the case in previous years. Our pair from Burner's Beach haven't been seen at all but there has been significant work on the track alongside this beach by council, to reinstate the track into the Burner's Beach Bush Camping Site. Hard to establish a scrape and lay eggs with big tractors and excavators only metres away, just as the breeding season started! Fortunately, we eventually found them on Levens Beach and they have a nest with 3 eggs and incubation has commenced.

Our two pairs of Red-capped Plovers both started their first nests for the season. Of note is the location of one of the nests, being in a spot where previously vehicles would have been turning. However, vehicles can no longer access the area due to significant storm damage to the track, making it impassable and hence the council have closed this track. This particular pair just had their chicks hatch and are out on the reef but sadly the other pair have lost their nest, probably due to Ravens, given the location of the nest, well out of the high tide line.

If you or someone you know might be interested in volunteering please contact BirdLife Australia as soon as possible, as we are very short of volunteers on Yorke Peninsula and probably more broadly around our coastline. It's a rewarding experience for you personally as we know volunteers enjoy their connection with one another, with the birds and the community generally and of course, can improve mental health! So, what are you waiting for?

High Seas, Storm Force Winds and Massive Swells Effect Breeding Activity

Jeff Campbell, Friends of Shorebirds SE Inc.,

Recent rough weather has caused a significant delay in Hooded Plover breeding attempts in the south east of South Australia. The conditions have caused significant erosion and water has over-topped many of the lower lying beaches, flooding many suitable nesting areas. Because of this, we have not found any Hooded Plovers breeding in the Port MacDonnell area, nor on Long Beach at Robe, even now in late October. We would usually have at least some birds nesting in August or September and although we have a number of birds in these areas, there is as yet no sign of breeding activity.

We have however, found two Australian Pied Oystercatcher nests recently, one near Port MacDonnell and one near the Victorian border. Both are high on dunes and one contains three eggs.

Australian Pied Oystercatcher on nest near Port MacDonnell. Photo: Sarah Campbell.

We can only hope that a moderation in the current conditions will allow for breeding activity for the Hoodies to commence.

Kangaroo Island: Keeping our Eyes on the Big Picture

Jean Turner, Volunteer Regional Coordinator, Friends of the Hooded Plover Kangaroo Island

In late March, a harmful algal bloom (HAB), first recorded on southern Fleurieu Peninsula, appeared at many Kangaroo Island (KI) beaches where Hooded Plovers, Pied Oystercatchers and Red-capped Plovers breed. Stingrays, sharks, scale-fish and marine invertebrates started washing up on our shores, along with murky foam and a pungent smell. Would our beach-nesting birds be affected?

In a nutshell, the *Karenia mikimotoi* bloom resulted from higher than usual sea temperatures coupled with high nutrient levels from ocean upwelling. We were advised that the HAB clogged fish gills and invertebrate filter systems but wouldn't affect birds. Having become ill from breathing in HAB aerosols, I thought our shorebirds might also feel a bit "off colour".

Somewhat reassured, we wondered what impact the HAB might have on Plover and Oystercatcher prey. By early April, a mass die-off of bivalves, gastropods and marine worms hinted that Oystercatchers may be in trouble. We guessed the smaller invertebrate prey of Plovers might be similarly affected.

Could lack of prey affect shorebird breeding success in 2025-26? What would happen to fish-eating birds and beach scavengers as fish mortality rose? Would Osprey and Sea Eagles shift prey when fish were in short supply? What would Gulls and Ravens turn to once the bonanza of dead fish and invertebrates was over? So many unknowns!

Dead Sunset Shell, Oystercatcher Prey, Island Beach. Photo: Jean Turner.

Pied Oystercatcher parent with young chicks. American Beach. Photo: Jean Turner.

Breeding season got off to a slow start. In early August, fewer Plovers than usual had returned to their territories and Oystercatchers had paired up but weren't nesting. By late August several Oystercatcher nests were underway. Red-capped Plovers followed suit and by early September some Hooded Plovers were nesting.

In spite of the autumn die-off of cockles and worms, a flurry of Pied Oystercatcher chicks has hatched. Hopefully their supply of prey will last to fledging! Hoodie chicks are appearing around the Island, while Red-caps are still keeping their chicks well hidden.

Emu Bay's estuary Hoodies have overcome the constant threat from vehicles on the beach, nurturing two chicks through to 39 days old. At Hanson Bay a Hoodie pair have hatched chicks on the first beach for the first time in several years. Great news overall!

However, we've also had some sobering news. Recently someone reported seeing an Osprey on KI take an adult Hooded Plover from a breeding territory. Terrible for the Hoodie and partner, and maybe a sign of desperate times for the Osprey.

Despite the challenges, KI's beach-nesting shorebirds soldier on, as do our monitoring volunteers, remaining hopeful and watchful to protect these precious birds!

Hooded Plover pair with 2 new chicks, Hanson Bay first beach. Photo: Jean Turner.