

## FINISHING HANZAB — A REFLECTION

The conclusion of the *HANZAB* series is a defining moment in the history of Australasian ornithology, and in the history of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU), and its contemporary incarnation, Birds Australia. It is also a great moment for all those who have been involved in the project over the last 25 years.

It is impossible at this point, as we struggle to finish our work on the final volume, and in the space that I have, to say adequately all that might need to be said. It is not remotely possible to summarize here the history of the project—that is a task for a later time. Nor is it possible here to thank properly all those who have helped, in large ways and small, over the quarter of a century that it has taken to finish this work. My comments below are a personal reflection, and personal thanks, but are also made sincerely on behalf of the entire *HANZAB* team, and Birds Australia.

It has been 25 years since the Council of the RAOU, in February 1981, gave approval to begin production of what was, then, a *Handbook of Australian Birds*. That decision has proved to have been one of the more significant decisions the governing body of this organization has ever made, not only in the value and importance of the project to the study and knowledge of ornithology in this region, but also in the impact that production of the work has had on Birds Australia itself.

From the outset, the major goals of the project have been, firstly, to summarize all that we know of the birds of Australia, and later New Zealand and the Antarctic, and to make clear what we do not know; and, secondly, to prepare detailed summaries of the plumages and other external morphology of all species, describing and analysing all sources of variation observed. The illustration of all species and of all obvious variation within them also soon became a highly important aspect of the project.

These goals have not altered over the life of the project. What did change, however, were the logistics, and cost, of completing the task we had set ourselves.

At its inception, the project was to be completed in four volumes over ten years. Even when I joined the project, in late 1987, it was still to be produced in four volumes. As we worked on finalizing Volume 1, we had already dropped the birds of prey from that volume. As production proceeded we were then confronted with the impossibility of fitting the rest into a single volume, and Volume 1 was produced in two parts. At this point, we knew we faced a far larger task than had originally been envisaged and that the logistics, and financing, of the project were going to be much more of a challenge than had been envisaged when Council approved commencement of the project in 1981. That the final volume has also had to be produced in two parts is a fitting 'bookend' to the series.

The realization of the extent of the work and the logistical changes needed to deal with them had a profound impact on Birds Australia itself. To complete *HANZAB* to the desired standard and timetable we needed to employ staff; this in turn greatly increased the cost of the project. Combined, this meant that Birds Australia had a much larger staff than at any time in its past and a greater need to raise large amounts of money on an ongoing basis. These needs affected the organization directly, such as the need for larger premises to accommodate the expanded *HANZAB* team. They also affected the organization indirectly, by accelerating progress that would otherwise have happened more slowly, such as the increasing professionalism and expertise of our fundraising and marketing efforts, the increasing need for more rigorous financial management, and employment of a full-time Director.

There have been many difficulties in the production of this work. A great many of these were the result of the unforeseen scope of the project. It is also important to remember that the imperatives that drove this project in 1981 are not necessarily the priorities of today. There has been—rightly I believe—a tension between the current demands and goals of the organization and those of 25 years ago and in deciding the spending priorities for an organization that cannot be considered wealthy when confronted with a project budget to completion of \$8 million.

These tensions have led some within and outside the organization to question the wisdom of pursuing the project, or to complain of the resources being spent on it that could have been spent on other projects. These were, and remain, legitimate criticisms of *HANZAB*, and I have welcomed such criticism, as disheartening as it was at times. In partial response, a project such as this, for better or worse, creates its own momentum and the costs to the reputation and prestige of the organization of not completing *HANZAB* would be significant. It is also simplistic to assume that the funds raised for *HANZAB* could have been merely redirected to other projects.

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While it is not remotely possible to mention here everyone who has been involved over the life of this project (all are listed in the detailed acknowledgements in the introduction to the various volumes, this one in particular),

there are a number of people who have been instrumental in seeing this project through to its completion, or in the quality of the final product. In acknowledging those who have been involved, there are two people who have been pivotal in the development and fostering of the project, and to whom we have dedicated the HANZAB series.

The first is the late Stephen Marchant, the driving force behind the instigation of the project, and the founding, and senior, editor for Volumes 1 and 2. Stephen retired from HANZAB at the end of Volume 2, in part because the demands of the work were too great but also in part because he felt forced to accept too many compromises in the publishing of the work. He also faced the difficulties and frustrations of working far from where the bulk of the work was taking place and where the publisher was based. However, long after he retired he continued to be an important supporter of the project, and a wonderful mentor to me personally. He was an insightful, funny and sometimes patient teacher who didn't suffer fools or poor writing gladly. He was not afraid to say, often bluntly, where we (or I) had gone wrong, though usually delivering the message with his typical mix of good humour and serious intent—a rare combination. I and HANZAB owe him a great deal.

The other important figure is the late Dr Norman Wettenhall, who had been indefatigable in his quest to advance the cause of Australian birds and to see HANZAB completed. He raised the bulk of the funds we needed to prepare HANZAB, without which there would be no HANZAB. It was my great privilege to have worked with Norman over the many years of our mutual involvement in HANZAB, and his support, enthusiasm, commitment and almost inexhaustible energy were an inspiration to all of us working on the project, especially at some of the darker moments in its history.

That we have a Handbook at all is largely a tribute to the efforts of these two men over many years.

As for the preparation of the texts and artwork for HANZAB, it has only been achieved through a team effort, and it has been my great privilege to have worked with the members of that team. It is not remotely possible to mention all by name, but I hope that they all remain proud of their contribution to this work, and know how deeply grateful I am for their efforts, as is Birds Australia.

While Stephen Marchant was the driving force in starting the project and its initial progress, he did not work alone. He was ably assisted at the outset by Peter Curry (Field Identification), Professor Henry Nix (Habitat), the late David Peters (Distribution and Population), Dr Stephen Garnett (Movements and Food), the late Dr Gerry van Tets (Social Organization and Behaviour), and Dr Peter Fullagar (Voice), with Stephen himself dealing with the Breeding sections. All contributed variously to the completion of Volume 1, with Drs Gerry van Tets and Peter Fullagar continuing their work through to Volumes 3 and 4 respectively.

As Volume 1 progressed and the extent of the work became apparent, some who began the editing of Volume 1 had to drop out, either before or at the conclusion of the volume. Others joined the team, and contributed to the further development of our approach and remained over several volumes; among them were John Peter, David Eades, Margaret Considine, Marilyn Hewish, Tony Howard, Jon Starks, and Danny Rogers and Rory O'Brien. Jeff Davies was also appointed as the artist for the series at this time.

David Eades prepared most of the field identification accounts for the series. Throughout, he has been a passionate advocate for the 'New Approach' to field identification, and has tried with his texts to provide Australasian ornithologists with the means to identify the various ages and sexes of our birds in the field to the standards now common elsewhere in the world. That what we were trying to achieve was not understood by some critics of the project was a great source of frustration, to him and me. The texts will stand testament to his great work.

The editors of the sections on Plumages and related matters have also made a major contribution to the ornithology of the Australasian region, and showed a commitment to the HANZAB project, and their particular tasks, that went far beyond what could have been expected of them. The editors who took on the bulk of this work were: Danny Rogers through the first four volumes and part of Volume 5 and who, with Rory O'Brien at the start of Volume 1, was instrumental in establishing and refining our approach from the outset; David James from Volumes 2 to 4; Andrew Dunn from Volumes 3 to 7; and Jamie Matthew from Volume 5 on, and who bore the brunt of the work on this final volume. All the editors of Plumages have, for the first time, prepared detailed descriptions of the external morphology of all the birds of our region, based on rigorous scientific descriptions and measurements of museum skins, using standardized methods, and compilation of all available sources of information. The texts for Plumages and related matters will long stand as a tribute to their hard work and commitment.

The artists too greatly extended themselves, with the excellence of their work readily apparent in each of the published volumes. They have painted 413 colour plates that show for the first time the variation in the external appearance of all the birds occurring in the HANZAB region. Initially, Jeff Davies was to be the sole artist for the series but this proved to be too massive a task; after painting all the plates for Volume 1 and most of those for Volume 2, additional artists were recruited to share the load towards the end of Volume 2, including Peter Marsack, Peter Slater, Nicolas Day and Frank Knight, all of whom went on to take a more major role in subsequent volumes. Jeff Davies continued to paint most of the plates for Volumes 3 and 4 but finished his work with HANZAB at the end of Volume 4. From then on, the bulk of the plates for each volume were prepared by Peter Marsack, Peter Slater, Kim Franklin and Nicolas Day.

As the scope of the work became apparent and the editorial duties increased, Kate Gorringer-Smith came on board as Assistant Editor, a role filled for the last ten years by Geoff Price. They both played crucial roles in the project, managing many aspects of it, compiling the components of the texts, undertaking preliminary edits, entering the interminable edits of the senior editors, organizing review of texts, conducting final checks on the accounts before submission to the publisher, and doing much of the proof-reading of the manuscript.

Early in Volume 4, we split the position of Managing Editor when I moved from the Melbourne office to concentrate on the editing of the remaining volumes, and appointed Dr Camilla Myers as HANZAB Project Manager. She took over at a very difficult time for the organization and for HANZAB, and did a superb job juggling the endless demands of the project, managing the Handbook team, and dealing with the comments of the reviewers and assisting with editing of the final texts. She was succeeded by Dr Will Steele, who continued the unenviable task of managing the project at an equally difficult time for the project. Lastly, following Will's departure, Sid Cowling fittingly took over the project management for the final volume, neatly concluding his role in the project, from its inception to its conclusion. These three played a crucial role in finishing the series, and in ensuring the quality of the volumes. I also want to thank Sid Cowling for his ongoing support and defence of HANZAB throughout the life of the project, support that was vital to the successful completion of the series.

Lastly, my co-editor for the final three volumes, John Peter, has worked on HANZAB longer than any other member of the team. As well as helping to edit the last few volumes, he has prepared or edited all the Distribution and Population accounts for the series, as well as preparing some entries for most other sections. That he has been one of the Senior Editors of HANZAB over the last three volumes is a fitting endorsement of his input to the project and his abilities. He has been a great support over the many years of this project, a wonderful colleague and a good friend.

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HANZAB has proved to be the most ambitious project that Birds Australia has ever undertaken: in the scope of its goals, its cost, and the logistics of completing the task. Always daunting, it developed into a multi-million dollar project that has consumed much of the time, and a great many of the resources, of Birds Australia.

We have prepared summaries for 957 species reported from the Australasian and Antarctic region. With few exceptions, these are the first attempts to integrate all the information available on the biology of the birds. Ultimately, however, the most important function of HANZAB will be in stimulating further studies and synthesis, and encouraging publication of these results. The success of this goal to date can in part be judged by the many citations of HANZAB in the primary literature, particularly the journals *Emu*, *Notornis* and *Australian Bird Watcher*.

It has been my great privilege to have worked on HANZAB. It remains a source of pride that I was fortunate enough to come onto the team before the publication of the first volume and to be here at its conclusion. It was certainly not something that I envisaged when I was interviewed for the position of Editorial Assistant some 18 years ago. Those years have encompassed much laughter and anguish as we struggled to the very best of our endeavours to get the volumes finished.

The completion of HANZAB brings to a close a long and significant chapter in the history of Birds Australia. It is a remarkable achievement for the organization and should be a source of great pride for everyone associated with Birds Australia and HANZAB.

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Sawtell, NSW,  
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