

## Obituary

*Maxwell Noel Maddock*

*28 September 1928 – 7 July 2016*



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On 7 July 2016, the noted ornithologist, academic, environmentalist and educator Dr Max Maddock died at the age of 87. Before retirement, Max was an Associate Professor in Education at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW). In the context of his concern for the protection of wetlands, he was particularly highly regarded as a co-founder of the now internationally renowned Hunter Wetlands Centre at Shortland, NSW. He was held in high esteem by many people, and the Celebration of Life service held in his memory at the Wetlands Centre was attended by people who knew him in a range of contexts, including fellow birdwatchers, former academic colleagues, former local and state government officials, local conservationists, former students, and two former Lord Mayors of Newcastle.

Max's highly productive life culminated in his major contributions to the community in wetlands ornithology and conservation. He also contributed significantly by his well-documented opposition to various ill-conceived development proposals, his novel teaching approach for his students, his accounts of his travels in various countries, and his many scientific and educational research projects published in a range of journals. In short, Max was a great teacher, an accomplished photographer, a very patient and persevering ornithologist, an environmental educator, a traveller, and an activist, as well as a wit and cartoonist.

Heather, Max's wife, says his life can be categorised in three phases: initially athletics, then horses and ultimately birds. Towards the end of the equestrian phase, Max leased land for his horses at the site that would eventually become the Hunter Wetlands Centre, and was fascinated by the egrets attracted to the area by periodic flooding. These egrets inspired the concept of the Hunter Wetlands

Centre and of Project Egret Watch, a community project embracing all of eastern Australia and even New Zealand.

Heather and Max met while boarding in north-western Tasmania, where Max was working as a school teacher. After a period in New Guinea as a school inspector and doctoral studies in the United States of America, Max joined the Education Department at the University of Newcastle. His career in education was breathtaking for the extraordinary range of issues and studies that he undertook. In his earlier years, he researched widely in such areas as science education and conservation education. As a member of staff at the University of Newcastle, he lobbied persistently for the ultimately successful introduction of a Master's degree program in environmental studies.

Arguably, this sequence of varied and ongoing personal development uniquely equipped Max for the extraordinary feat of uniting the community, business, local and state government to fund and create the Hunter Wetlands Centre. Having listened to his hair-raising exploits travelling in light aircraft to remote communities in New Guinea, one can understand why he found no obstacle insurmountable.

In 1983, Max invited selected organisations and individuals to a meeting at which he proposed the acquisition of the land where his horses were kept to build an Environmental Education Centre. The site he had in mind was the defunct Hamilton Marist Rugby Club, which was in liquidation. Subsequently, Max, with extraordinary vigour and strength of mind, managed to bring most of Neville Wran's NSW Government to Newcastle and persuaded them that the project was worthwhile. As Max said, 'it was a goer'—and his dream of an Environmental Education Centre would become a Bicentennial project for Newcastle.

The Hunter Wetlands Centre, which defines Max's contribution to ornithology, is unique within Australia in providing an environmental hub in the middle of an industrial city. It has an educational function, is a bird observatory in an internationally acclaimed wetland, and is a field-study centre with projects embracing the spectrum of natural history.

Max was the ultimate communicator, as exemplified by Project Egret Watch. He recruited teams of Hunter volunteers to band and tag egrets, both at the Wetlands Centre and at Seaham Swamp near his home. This was expanded to something akin to a small empire by the early 1990s, with Max securing funding to employ a full-time Project Egret Watch co-ordinator. Bird-banders were now tagging egrets under the Project Egret Watch banner at nine coastal breeding colonies from Seaham, in the Hunter Valley of NSW, north to Bundaberg in Queensland, as well as in the Macquarie Marshes in inland NSW. He then recruited observers throughout eastern Australia to seek and find where the egrets went after leaving their

breeding colonies: records were obtained from as far afield as southern Tasmania, South Australia, and even New Zealand. Max sustained his collaborators by continual feedback on the value and meaning of their sightings. To put this achievement into perspective, one has to appreciate that this was happening before the advent of email and today's instant communication systems (those were the days of 'snail mail'). Seldom has a project been sustained in such a personal manner, with continual acknowledgement of his volunteers rewarded with their unflagging loyalty.

In later years, Max utilised his vast repertoire of skills to work with others in opposing environmentally unsound projects such as the proposal to build an international airport on Kooragang Island, an area situated amongst salt marsh and mangrove communities. In that specific context, he made a detailed study of the impact of aircraft on bird populations, particularly highlighting the impact of bird-strikes likely to cause major hazards and even tragedies involving loss of life of aircraft passengers. In a similar vein, he wrote a trenchant criticism of a proposal to construct a fourth coal-loader on waterfront land that would irrevocably destroy the habitat of numerous shorebirds and waders.

Max's concern for his egrets progressively expanded to concern over their wetland habitats in the Hunter Estuary and beyond. He became deeply involved in the Ramsar Convention's wise management and conservation of wetlands. Max, now past his prime, gate-crashed a visit by Peter Garrett, the Federal Environment Minister, to hand deliver his personal submission on the plight of the Hunter Wetlands. The outstanding ongoing examples of wetlands rehabilitation and environmental advocacy, for which the Hunter region is being increasingly renowned, stem from the awareness and culture that Max generated. He encouraged some outstanding disciples including many members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club.

Max was always prepared to ambush an audience to talk about the Hunter Wetlands Centre and his egrets. His spontaneous unscheduled speech during a Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) meeting at Wollongong, NSW, in 1985 so impressed the members of the Council of the day that they determined he would be a valuable member of their ranks. Max was duly elected, and served three terms on the RAOU between 1986 and 1992. In that era, RAOU headquarters were at Gladstone Street in Moonee Ponds, Victoria, and interstate Council members slept rough in the library, surrounded by shelves of books and journals. That memory encapsulates the volunteer ethic of that era, which drove the RAOU on a financial shoestring and made the delivery of ridiculous visions possible, fitting in with Max's philosophy on life.

Science-based evidence is the prerequisite of effective conservation and advocacy. Again Max provides a role model with peer-reviewed publications on his egret studies, becoming an acknowledged expert on herons and related species. Although his ornithological productivity diminished in his final years, his love of birds and fascination with their behaviour blossomed. An astonishing variety of birds was photographed in his small garden at Ashtonfield, attracted by native shrubs and supplied with copious quantities of meal worms. Can Superb Fairy-wrens suffer obesity? Max always tried to find patterns in, and explanations for, the birds' antics, his mind inquisitive to the end.

*Mike Newman, Fellow, BirdLife Australia*

*Kevin McDonald, former Vice-Chairman, Board of Directors, Hunter Wetlands Centre*