

Hooded Plovers in Lorne.

13 February 2024

The chicks are now 36 days old. The first time they attempted flight, it looked like two pieces of sea foam had been tossed into the wind. But now they seem to have got the hang of flying in a straight line, at least. **To graduate and be considered fully fledged, they need to take a 50m flight over water and return.** *Birdlife Australia* who organises the volunteers feels this will be by tomorrow evening (Wednesday).

There were some family dynamics this morning. A parent was seen to rough up one the chicks. Then two parents and just one chick departed for the estuary, leaving the other chick alone up in the nesting area. Then the two parents were seen back in the protection zone, feeding on the water line, and one chick only was the nesting area. GORCAPA staff went searching for the other chick in the sand dune and could not find him/her. Finally, by 9am two chicks were reunited and were seen bunkered down with one parent in the dried kelp. The other parent was off feeding. So normal family life was restored.

Fresh footprints and dog prints in the protection zone today show that people are not heeding the rules after dark and/or early in the morning when volunteers have not yet arrived. This is disappointing. But overall, the maintenance of the protection zone in Lorne has been a **massive feat of public cooperation.**

Michael Prideaux is one of the volunteers on the beach watch. He has supplied some stunning photos capturing the parents warding off threats; the family bunkering on the sand; feeding on the sand and the chicks' stretching out their growing wings. *BirdLife Australia* has Beach-Nesting Bird Photo Guidelines to ensure that photographers do not attempt to get up close. Michael captured these images with a strong camera lens from a safe distance. Many thanks to him.

The flight photos are from Coralee Thorsen, whose husband was competing in the Surf Carnival over the weekend. She brought her camera to Lorne knowing we had a hoodie family ensconced. She took these photos according to *Birdlife Australia* guidelines on Sunday morning (the 11th). Thanks so much Coralee.



Michael Prideaux



Michael Prideaux



Michael Prideaux



Michael Prideaux, 2024



Michael Prideaux, 2024



Michael Prideaux, 2024



Michael Prideaux, 2024. This chick, at 33 days old, has not yet acquired the black characteristic hood and red beak of an adult



Michael Prideaux, 2024. At 33 days old, family resting in seaweed.



Michael Prideaux, 2024. At 33 days old, stretching wings.



Coralee Thorsen Photography 2024

Coralee Thorsen, 2024 Chicks take flight, Day 34.



Coralee Thorsen Photography 2024

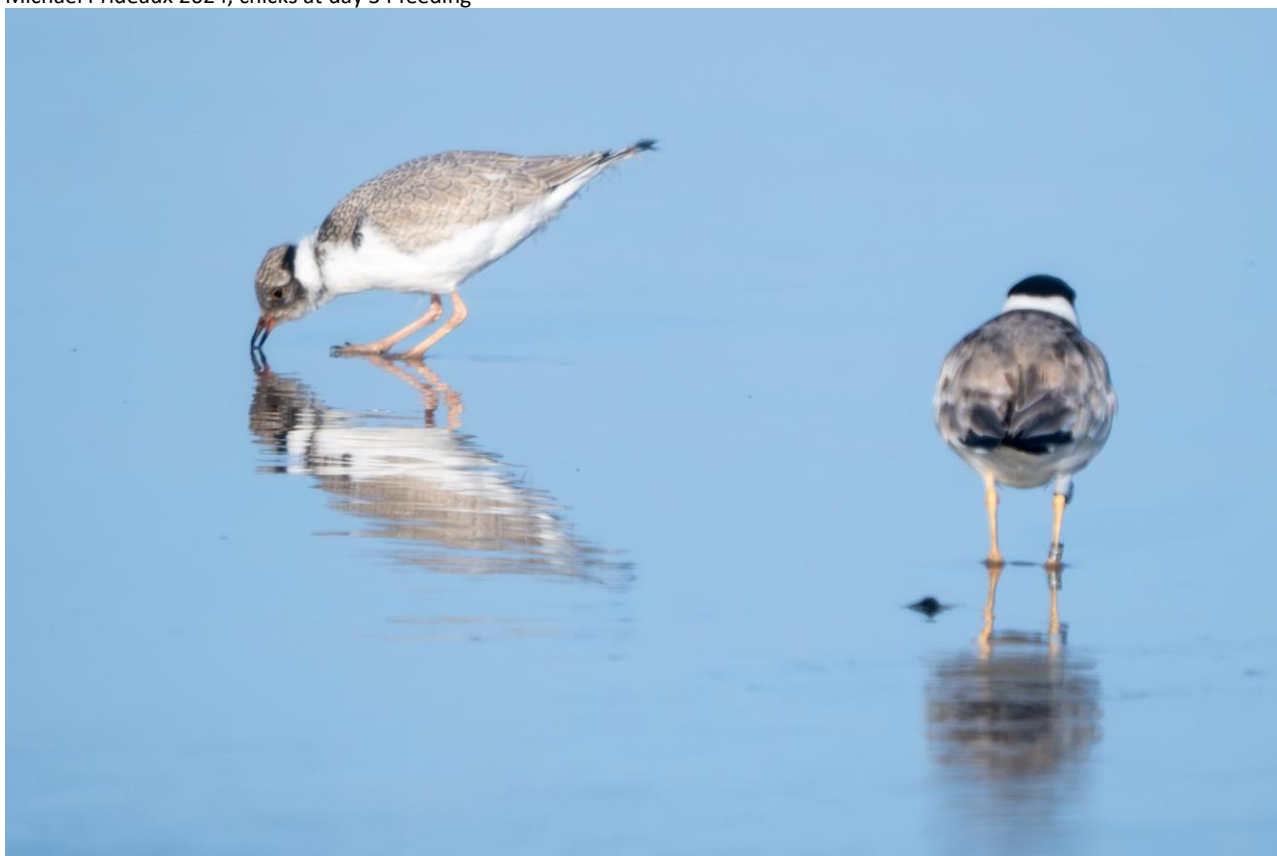
Coralee Thorsen, Family in flight Day 34. Along the sand from m one set of bunting flags to the other.



Michael Prideaux, 2024. At 34 days old, stretching wings.



Michael Prideaux 2024, chicks at day 34 feeding



Michael Prideaux 2024, Chick at day 34, finding crustaceans or sea lice in the sand

The male parent was born in Moggs Creek five years ago and was banded (tagged) by Evan Francis of GORCAPA (Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority). Evan now works with the Lorne community on other projects (Pt Grey restoration and redevelopment). Not all chicks are banded (resources are limited).

Mortality rates are very high. Dogs and people account for 75% of the mortality. The male parent has tried to raise chicks each year, but he only raised one chick successfully in 2019. It was at Moggs Creek, so of course the chick was named Paddy, after Moggs' famous resident, Patrick Dangerfield.

If the chicks get past 5 weeks to fledge, the average length of life is 15+ years. But without human help the usual survival rate of chicks is 2.5%, the lowest of any species on the planet. It's because we have taken up their habitat and so it takes human intervention to give the habitat back.

The bulk of the visitors have gone. Our **biggest difficulty now** is people who, when we approach them, wave us away saying "yes, yes, we know all about the birds." And then they insist that they can walk through the no-go zone by keeping to the water line. No, they can't. And **bringing a dog on to the beach is worse**.

The Protection Zone

The Hooded Plover advice *usually* is "stay out of the enclosure, keep dogs away, and stick to walking the water's edge." This works OK on beaches with few people.

But in Lorne the protection area is a complete no-dog, no-people zone, even on the water's edge. This is because chicks feed themselves from day 1 and the chicks follow the water's edge down at low tide to feed. Any disturbance risks them being trodden on or hiding for too long and starving meanwhile. The **volume of Lorne beach foot traffic in summer is just too high** to opt for any protection less rigorous in our context.

We applaud GORCAPA for taking strict, **unprecedented zoning measures**. The protection strategy is all about making the habitat available for the full 5 weeks while the chicks grow and get ready to fly away. The role of volunteers (see more below) is to explain the situation to beach walkers and ask that they take the path along Cypress Avenue instead of walking through the roped area or swimming in front of it. The zone applies at both high and low tide. That is, it is not permitted to walk the beach in front of the protection area, even when the low tide exposes it. The exclusion zone extends into the sea, but it is not possible to fence it all the way.

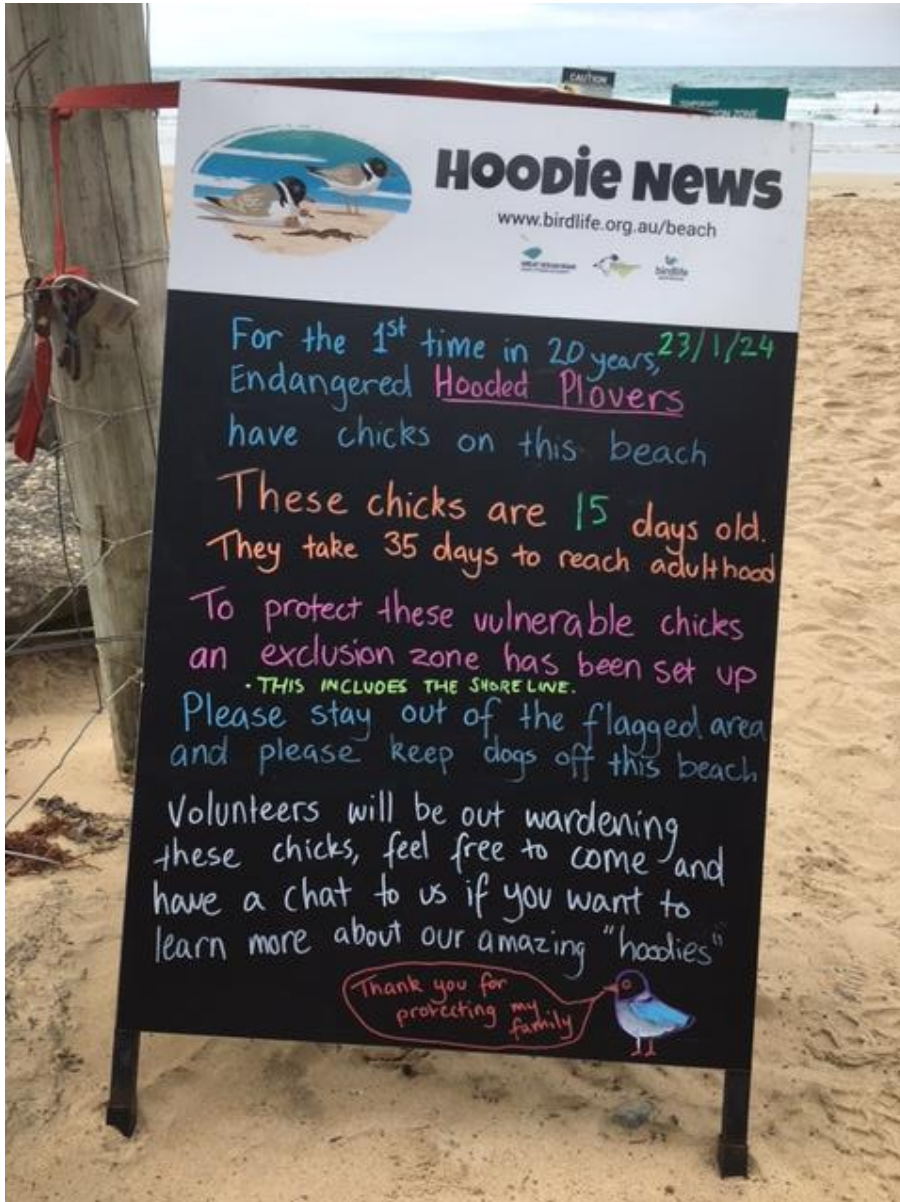
Dog owners who arrive before 9am or after 7pm expecting the area to be a dog off leash zone will find it is a **temporary DOG EXCLUSION zone** while the chicks are here (an estimated 5 weeks in total). The dog exclusion zone runs from the groyne to the Erskine River (to the yellow marker in the sand at the river mouth). Ramps and steps down to the beach announce the dog exclusion zone. But after 7pm in the evening and before 9am dogs can still be off leash in front the Swing Bridge café, in the river and at the estuary mouth, because that is outside the new temporary zone.

The zone regulations are enforceable by law. Police can fine people. So can staff from the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (DEECA) who also visit. Both DEECA and the police have been terrific in their support.

What volunteering involves

Asking groups of people to make a small detour is not as hard as it seems, once the potential walkers realise that all-of-Lorne is stepping up and the person asking them is a volunteer. Plus, once you thrust a pair of binoculars into their bare hands, beach goers get the *sheer delight* of seeing the chicks themselves. So, they are happy to adjust.

Talking to the public has also allowed us to correct **misinformation**. The big one is that people think we have gone to all this bother to protect lapwings or spur winged plovers. They are 20 times bigger and they are loud and aggressive. You find them on the beach, but also inland, or maybe nesting on your garage roof. They are very common and don't need any help. Hooded plovers are small and ONLY found on the beach and are rare. A **big thank you** the volunteers. The job is almost done.



Thank you,
Penny Hawe. 13 February 2024