Hoodwinked

Carole Poustie

At first, I don't see them. All at once I'm upon them, almost too close – and too late. I've been walking along the waterline, the tide on its way in, scanning the area around the high tide mark where they usually frequent, camera in hand and my bichon poodle, Milly, in tow. It's a photographer's dream shot. They are hunkered down behind a small mound of sand a little further up the beach, close to the dunes. They blend in with the flotsam of broken cuttlefish shells, dried out seaweed, driftwood fragments, perfectly camouflaged. Involuntarily I let out a little 'Oh!'. Five Hoodies snuggled together in a perfect line, all with heads aligned in the same direction, tucked back into their wings.

A quick look behind and further up the beach to ascertain the proximity of other walkers. No one close. Good. Heart in mouth I make a ninety degree turn and creep up towards the high tide mark, dog on a short lead. When I'm level with the Hoodies I crouch down low and pray they keep their eyes closed. Thank goodness for my new teleconverter which gives my 500mm lens more reach. I waddle closer. But not too close. I don't want to breech the birds' comfort zone. These little Aussie battlers deserve to enjoy their afternoon siesta undisturbed. Aside from the fact that one step too close will wreck this once-in-a-million photo opportunity. Any sighting of the Hoodies is a highlight for me. I have fallen in love with them. So exquisite and oh so vulnerable. To keep an eye out for them and to produce a

portfolio of affecting captures has become my mission. Maybe one of my photos can be used in the campaign to save these precious beach dwellers from extinction.

I motion for Milly to drop, grateful she's compliant and clever. Trained not to chase our chooks when she was a puppy and too timid to leave my side, she's the perfect bird-watcher's companion. It's a sunny day and the sand is not too damp, so I ease myself down onto my elbows and knees, then lie flat. I'll worry later about getting these sixty-something-year-old bones back up again without dousing my camera in sand. Please, God, let my invisibility cloak buy me time to check my camera settings. It wouldn't be the first time I'd rattled off a stream of shots in a golden opportunity moment only to find later I'd had the ISO set for the previous night's sunset and ended up with photo upon photo of whitewash. Aperture f8, check. Shutter speed 1/1250 sec, check. ISO 800, check. Focus set …

The two walkers with their off-lead staffy come out of nowhere. They are taking a line half-way between the low- and high-water mark. I'm sure they eyeball me but keep walking.

Within seconds the staffy is amongst the Hoodies.

At one time the eastern hooded plover (Thinornis culcullatus culcullatus) made its home along the beaches of the southeast coast of Australia from South Australia to southern Queensland, including Tasmania. It is now locally extinct in both northern New South Wales and Queensland. It is listed as Vulnerable under both National and Victorian Threatened Species Legislation. Hoodies need to inhabit beaches that are strewn with large amounts of seaweed, in order to source the seaweed-eating invertebrates that make up their diet. And to do this they are more often than not forced to share their habitat with a recreation-loving human population who may not be aware of their plight or on board with the need to provide safe-haven for these oftentimes hard-to-see pint-sized beach-dwellers.

Threats prevent the Hoodies from breeding successfully. These threats have increased over time as the human footprint has impacted the Hoodie habitat. According to Birdlife Australia:

> Human-based threats include numerous introduced weeds that have led to habitat loss and degradation, and also introduced predators such as foxes, feral cats and off-leash dogs. Of course, beach users also pose major threats in terms of crushing eggs and chicks underfoot, hoof or vehicle tyres, as well as

> disturbance. Disturbance occurs when birds encounter people, dogs and other predators, and they respond by sneaking away from the nest or sending the chicks into hiding, where their camouflage will keep them safe. However, long periods where eggs are exposed to harsh temperatures or chicks are unable to feed, can be lethal.

And this doesn't include the impact of climate change, sea level rise, high tides and storm events.

As the staffy bounds up to the Hoodies they scatter into the air, their combined bodies a tangle of alarm. So shocked, I cry out, 'What?!' in dismay. The walkers give me a look of disdain. They continue to approach and make no attempt to control the dog. My own alarm and incredulity must be written all over my face, but they remain indifferent and keep advancing. Even if they had failed to spot the Hoodies, as I had nearly done, a woman sprawled out on the sand in the middle of winter, metres away, with a camera and telephoto lens lined up in front of her would surely be visible. And mightn't she be photographing something of import, so that a passer-by might at least pause to ascertain the full picture before proceeding?

The dog continues to bound and chase, and again the Hoodies rise into the air. I can't fathom the owners' lack of response. Because if the Hoodies were hidden before, anyone with sight would be able to see the situation unfolding. And to not intervene on behalf of the birds, even if these people were to possess an unmitigated disregard for photographers, seems abhorrently callous. A rush of anguish sweeps through me as I realise my powerlessness to intervene to stop the horror. I feel momentarily light-headed, my stomach on fire with indignation and a burgeoning rage. And curiously, I feel hurt that these dog-walkers have ignored me.

I'm new to this Hoodie business. Well, sort of. I can't remember a time I haven't been fascinated with birds. To me, their exquisiteness is breathtaking. But it's more than that. I'm enamoured by them, irresistibly drawn to them. Maybe in another life I *was* a bird?! Who knows what this attraction is? And over my many years I've had pivotal moments with various individual birds. These have been transformative, life-changing – and in one case, life-saving – moments. Without sounding like someone who is speaking from a substance-

induced alternate reality, I feel an affinity with birds. When I am with them my soul smiles and at my core, I feel connected to something larger, beneficent. It's like being heard by a friend. Or perhaps my experience with birds is similar to what Wendell Berry describes in his poem, 'The Peace of Wild Things':

> When despair for the world grows in me
> and I wake in the night at the least sound
> in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
> I go and lie down where the wood drake
> rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
> I come into the peace of wild things
> who do not tax their lives with forethought
> of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
> And I feel above me the day-blind stars
> waiting with their light. For a time
> I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

My journey with Hoodies began decades ago when they were known as hooded dotterels and I'd see them on my beach walks at Ocean Grove while staying over the summer holidays. So tiny! And unless you had your binoculars with you, impossible to see their detail. And of course, I had read about their endangered status, their vulnerability.

2020 was to be my year of the great escape. I was to take a sabbatical from my teaching job and fulfil a life-long dream of living for several months in a small village in France. When the Coronavirus pandemic struck, because I was immune-deficient, I decided to take my sabbatical anyway and stay at our house in Ocean Grove to where my partner and I are considering retiring. It was time for a rest after a prolonged period of postgraduate study and work. A time to pause, to take stock. Peel away the layers of other people's expectations and demands. And perhaps it was a providential opportunity to trial retirement in Ocean Grove. Was this the place in which I'd like to see out my days? How would I carve out a place for myself in this community I have only ever been part of as a holiday maker? How would I occupy my time away from all my usual city-based pastimes? And where would I meet friends?

What I didn't expect was that five tiny birds would capture my attention so completely and be instrumental in cracking the door open to a community of Hoodie-loving people with whom I suspect I could feel very much at home.

Our house in Ocean Grove is a short drive to the 'dog beach', an all-year-round off-lead area. My lockdown ritual includes a walk along this section of beach with Milly and on towards Point Lonsdale and into Hoodie territory. Late in the afternoon or on cold or windy days this section of beach is often deserted. Which for this introvert who regains her energy by being alone is bliss. During the course of one of my walks, early on in the lockdown, I happened upon a group of hooded plovers foraging for food by the water's edge. They made a magical sight, lit by the late afternoon sun, their perfect reflections in the shallow water. It would have made a stunning photo. I determined to return on the morrow with my camera.

For days, however, the only bird I saw was the odd seagull. Then finally, about a week later, the effort of lugging my camera with its heavy lens on my lockdown beach walks each day was rewarded. I discovered them one afternoon, higher up on the sand, the five of them busily foraging, their little beaks plunging into the sand, mini pile drivers, then running further along the beach to mine another area. Fascinating to watch them being so focussed and industrious, sticking close. They reminded me of the chooks we had when my children were small; a lone bird would realise the others had moved on to peck in another area of the garden then run helter-skelter to catch up with the group. The Hoodies rapid running style far more elegant than the chooks, of course. Even though my photographic captures weren't perfect, later, at home, I found myself enraptured by the small birds that had come to life in full detail on my computer screen.

Earlier in the year I had joined the local Bellarine Birdlife group. Though never having met them in person due to the Coronavirus restrictions, I received their newsletters, sent out more frequently to bolster the members' morale in the wake of their cancelled outings. Members had been sending in birding news and photos from their various locales. I sent in a couple of photos of the Hoodies. Two of the birds had been flagged, one bearing the orange flag JU, and the other, a white KW. Several days later an email came back from Andrea Dennett, the coordinator of the Bellarine Friends of the Hooded Plover group, expressing delight that the birds were still around. She outlined the story of where they had originated, who had flagged them as fledglings and where they had been sighted since:

> In June 2019, John Murray first spotted KW in a flock of Hoodies at Collendina. When she was spotted later in the season with JU – named after Julian White, one of the volunteers involved with minding him as a chick – we had high hopes

> for them, but they didn't get their act together last season at all. KW is originally from Koonya West, on the Mornington Peninsula and was banded on 13/2/2019 accordingly (and also coincidentally in honour of one of the local Mornington Peninsula volunteers, Karen Wootton).
>
> The MP vols were overjoyed to hear of KW's appearance at Collendina:
>
> 'KW was an extremely confident chick that enabled us to watch development from about five metres away at Koonya West. The very experienced parents are very trusting of the volunteers and locals on the beach. The father is JZ a legend at 23 years old! Mother is XT. After leaving the parents at Koonya West, KW spent a couple of months in the Portsea flock.'
>
> I will forward on the photo of KW to the MP vols. They will be rapt to see 'their baby'.

Learning of JU's and KW's history warms my heart and piques my interest in them even further. This new knowledge personalises them for me. On the days they aren't in their usual location I walk further towards Point Lonsdale until I find them. I discover that sometimes JU and KW hang out together as a single pair. Other days I find them with the familiar three or four sub-adult birds. On one occasion I find them much further along the beach with a flock of thirteen Hoodies. Then on one dark day I discover JU on his own, KW nowhere in sight. I walk home with a heavy heart, unable to dismiss the thought of a frisky dog or feral cat putting an end to her.

At home, I find myself gazing at photos of KW. What if these are the very last images of her? I think about the Mornington Peninsula volunteers who banded her and their keen ongoing interest in her life journey. As much as I try to focus on other things, KW consumes my thinking. What has become of her?

I recognise this as a threshold moment.

There is no turning back. No switching off my emotional investment in these precariously situated winged darlings of the south eastern coast of Australia. Like falling in love – there's little you can do to reverse it. My heart has been hoodwinked by these teeny weenies. A thought pops into my head and I speculate about whether I'd be able to summon the emotional distance to become a volunteer Hoodie protector. If I feel this amount of angst about KW's disappearance, how would I go monitoring chicks? Am I 'warden' material? What if I become invested in a breeding pair – say, JU and KW? What if they succeed to produce chicks? How will I curb my anxiety for the length of time it takes them to fledge?

What if I witness a raven pinch the eggs, a magpie take one of the chicks? A dog? It happens all the time. I've read the statistics. The survival rates are grim. What about interacting with the public, the dog walkers with their dogs off-lead in proximity to Hoodie parents and chicks to whom I've invested my whole heart? And the training! I'll become obsessed and want to know everything! Am I cut out for this?

Maybe I'll stick to photography. Stick to my original mission. Capture the perfect Hoodie shot to use in a campaign.

Several days later, with a bitter wind squalling, numbing my fingers as I try to focus my binoculars to scour the coastline for signs of Hoodie activity, a man heading towards me from the Point Lonsdale direction appears in the distance through my field of view. What is he doing? Looking for something on the high sand where the plovers might be? My mother hen urge to protect kicks in. He'd better not be disturbing them. As he draws closer, I see that he, too, is sporting a pair of binoculars. 'Are you looking for Hoodies?' I venture.

'Yes,' comes the reply. 'There's a group of them back towards Point Lonsdale, beyond the rocks.'

'Did you spot KW? She wasn't with JU the other day. They're *always* together. I've been so worried. I'm thinking a dog might have caught her.' It all comes tumbling out.

Yes, she's with the others.' His tone is friendly and reassuring. I wonder if he thinks I'm nuts.

'Are you involved with the Hoodie volunteers?' I motion towards his binoculars. I'm hungry for any information I can get my hands on to fill the void in my knowledge.

'Yes. What about you? Are you a volunteer? Do you live around here?'

I give him a quick run-down on my sabbatical situation and say, 'No, I'm not officially involved but I'd like to be.' He suggests I contact Birdlife Australia. 'You'll need to do an induction, first.' He says the Hoodies will be breeding soon. That there's already been a report of a scrape (the shallow hole in the sand the birds create in which to lay their eggs) in South Australia – and it's only August. Then he politely excuses himself and tells me he has walked from Point Lonsdale and someone is waiting to pick him up further down the beach. I ask his name and offer my own. Maybe I'll recognise it if he's part of the local Bellarine bird group. 'John Murray,' he tells me, and takes his leave.

I heave a sigh of relief about KW and smile to myself that of all people to meet on the beach it was the person who first spotted her here.

In the ensuing week I notice that KW seems to be more independent than I thought when I see her without JU and out and about with her other Hoodie friends. In another email exchange with Andrea Dennett I learn that the area of beach where JU and KW hang out is a 'flocking' area for the Hoodies during the non-breeding season and is popular with the Mornington Peninsula sub-adults who may be looking for new territories and partners. When it's time to breed the flocks disband and the birds pair up. I realise I have a lot to learn and feel a pang of grief – or is it embarrassment – about my naivety, my limited knowledge. I leave JU and KW to sort things out for themselves. And did John Murray also say to me on the beach that day during our brief encounter not to worry about the adult Hoodies and dogs. That they were resilient and could look after themselves? Or did I make that up?

An email from Daniel Lees, the Coastal Birds Project Officer from Birdlife Australia, arrives into my inbox. He outlines the sign-up procedure and induction process required to become a volunteer for Birdlife Australia's beach-nesting birds monitoring program. It's a friendly email that ends with, 'Welcome to the team'.

The staffy keeps on with it – bound, pounce, bound, pounce. Then, mercifully, after what feels like an excruciatingly long few moments more, the dog loses interest and runs back to its owners, who by this time have sauntered past. It's then I realise that the gods are smiling, because as much as I feel like extricating myself from the sand and pursuing the couple, a small miracle has happened. The dog has, in fact, herded the Hoodies in my direction. They seem oblivious of Milly and me because of our prone position and my camouflaged camera lens. I might have lost the perfect shot of them all lined up napping, but this is surely the closest I'm likely to ever be to this little band of five. KW, JU and the three sub-adults. All fossicking busily for whatever it is that Hoodies eat, beaks thrusting in and out of the sand mere metres away. Who's been hoodwinked now?

Time to start snapping.

Works Cited

Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things*, Penguin Books, 2018, p 25.

Birdlife Australia, *Threats to MyHoodie: a guide to identifying threats to the Hooded Plover and other beach-nesting birds in southern Australia*.

City of Greater Geelong, *Conservation Action Plan Hooded Plover*.

Andrea Dennett, Personal email, 2020.