

### 2023 Serventy Conservation Award

The prestigious Serventy Conservation Award was inaugurated in 1999 to commemorate the outstanding wildlife conservation work by the members of the Serventy family – Vincent Serventy, his brother Dr Dominic Serventy, and his sister Lucy Serventy. Each member of the Serventy family has committed to conserving Australia's wildlife for a lifetime. The award is intended to recognise and celebrate wildlife conservation work that has not been done as part of a professional career. It is awarded to those who labour in the field for a love of nature and a determination that it should be conserved. Often, these have been non-scientists who have earned their wildlife conservation skills through sheer hard work.

The award for 2023 was presented to **Robert Westerman** of Hope Island, Queensland.

Robert (Bob) is a retired TAFE teacher and passionate birdwatcher. For more than two decades, he has dedicated his time to safeguarding the endangered migratory shorebirds of Broadwater on the Gold Coast by monitoring and collecting data. His quest has led him to map and record how shorebirds are distributed throughout the Broadwater and its associated systems. His efforts have resulted in a comprehensive database of around three thousand records from forty sites. Bob is always happy to share the recent figures of migratory birds on the Broadwater, including Curlew Island and Curlew Banks, using illustrated counts to showcase the importance of protecting these precious sites.

Bob has a passion for protecting the shorebirds and their homes and has teamed up with community groups, such as the Gold Coast Bushwalkers, to educate them about migratory birds and why they need protection. He has also engaged with the local Indigenous elders, the Kombumerri people, to seek insight on preserving the Broadwater. He has contacted the Gold Coast Waterways Authority multiple times to express his concerns about the destructive activities on the Broadwater affecting the migratory birds.

Bob has achieved some wins over the last few years, with Curlew Island being made an environmental reserve. He is currently working on having a trustee appointed to this site. His next goal is to protect the waters of the Broadwater to ensure a safe habitat for migratory shorebirds. Bob's efforts in educating the community and safeguarding these birds are vital for their conservation and long-distance journeys. His passion and dedication make him deserving of the prestigious Serventy Conservation Award.

#### Acceptance Speech from Robert Westerman

I feel stunned and humbled. I never seek recognition, but it is a special feeling when it happens. Conservation journeys are challenging, and knowing you have people on your side is encouraging. Awards like this one let you know you have supporters, giving you fresh fuel to get the job done.

I want to thank Sam O'Connor MP, Member for Bonney, Queensland, who nominated me. Sam has been a constant source of support. He has a love of the natural environment, and he is an important voice in the Queensland Parliament. I would also like to thank the Australian Wildlife Society for the role they have played for over one hundred years in caring for and protecting our precious wildlife. I am also thankful to the many other groups in Australia that are implementing similar work.

It is a time when rampant urbanisation is sucking dry everything in its path, and the average Australian's connection to our natural environment is diminishing – a time when nature needs every available voice to speak up on its behalf.

Organisations such as the Australian Wildlife Society are bridges that help us to keep in touch with the natural gifts of our wonderful land. These natural gifts set us apart from the rest of the world, and they are a source of unity at a time when there is so much diversity in our community. Care of the environment today seems to focus on using resources, clean energy, air, and water and less on the wealth of the natural life surrounding

us. I have found that nature is poorly understood these days or taken for granted, making it undervalued or open to exploitation.

My association with the southern part of the Gold Coast Broadwater started fourteen years ago when I found it was rich in birdlife, none of its features were named, and nothing here was managed or protected. Its features are now named, and I am confident that the mountain of data that has been assembled will eventually see it adequately managed and protected.

The Gold Coast Broadwater has been studied many times. Each study has identified the environmental significance of Curlew Banks and Curlew Island. Project developers are now leaving this area alone, but irresponsible behaviour is rife, threatening the viability of the banks. This situation arose because the southern part of the Gold Coast Broadwater was excluded from the Moreton Bay Marine Park in 1993 and not included in the Moreton Bay Ramsar Zone. This probably occurred because of the rigid political attitudes of that time. This left the southern Broadwater without any form of management or protection.

The sandbars of the Gold Coast Broadwater are rich in migratory birds, terns, and many other species. The key sites are Curlew Island and Curlew Banks. These sites meet the tests of national significance on several criteria. On any day between August and March, forty or more Far Eastern curlew (*Numenius*



2023 Serventy Conservation Award Recipient. L to R: Robert Westerman and Trevor Evans.

madagascariensis) and many other migratory birds will be present here. It is not uncommon to find up to 1,000 birds on Curlew Banks, including migratory birds and a wide range of other species.

My endeavour to map and record how shorebirds are distributed throughout the Gold Coast Broadwater has given me many precious encounters with nature. Discovering another one of nature's secrets is always a cause for elation. It is no longer a blank sheet and is much better understood, especially among public officials. The wheel is turning slowly against much friction – but in the right direction.

In 2019, Curlew Island was declared an Environmental Reserve, but this has never been fully implemented, as a trustee has not been appointed. We are working on this.

The last step is to have the waters of the Gold Coast Broadwater protected. A review of the Moreton Bay Marine Park is about to start, and changes to the park boundary will be considered as a result of data presented to the Department of Environment about shorebird areas outside the park boundary. I am hopeful of a positive outcome for this.

The challenge today is to look after our wildlife in a modern environment. Curlew Island and Curlew Banks have many special features, and I am confident that the conservation of our precious migratory birdlife and other species will be achieved here.