



# North Head Sanctuary Foundation Inc

## Custodians of North Head

ABN 97093480659 P.O. Box 506, Balgowlah, NSW 2093  
northheadsanctuaryfoundation.org.au

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### Season's Greetings



We send our heartfelt thanks to all our members, volunteers, newsletter columnists, photographers, Spring Walks enthusiasts and visitors for all your support over the past year, and wish all a safe and happy holiday season. We look forward to sharing further news and stories about North Head in the new year.

### Plunge-diving and piracy - the oceanic birds of North Head

Matthew Taylor

Flanking North Head and almost encircling it, is a realm every bit as rich in wildlife as the landmass of North Head itself. The ocean is a rich source of food - plankton and larger prey like jellyfish, small crustaceans and fish - which supports a surprising abundance of birds seldom seen from land.

To access these rich food supplies, birds adopt a wide range of strategies, from plunge-diving to piracy. Gannets fly 50-100m above the water until they spot a school of fish then tuck in their wings and dive like an arrow to plunge beneath the surface where they stab their prey or chase it under water using their wings to swim/fly through the water. A big flock of gannets dropping from the sky in unison and sending up multiple sprays as they hit the surface is one of nature's great spectacles. You can see gannets from the North Head lookouts in most months as they spend a lot of time inshore. Terns use the same strategy but generally from less of a height.

The bulk of the truly oceanic birds are the 'tubenoses' - the albatrosses, shearwaters and petrels so called for their pronounced nostrils which they use for smelling chemicals given off by their food. These birds spend hours and days on the wing gliding just above the waves looking for jellyfish, prawns and fish close to the surface that they can pluck from the water as they fly past or by settling on the water and picking off items. Black-browed albatrosses can also be seen from North Head in most months - huge birds gliding effortlessly just above the waves.

You might also glimpse big flocks of Short-tailed shearwaters, smaller dark brown birds passing through on migration. These are the birds you are most likely to find washed up dead on the shoreline - the perils of a migration that takes them to and from the northern Pacific to islands off NSW and TAS to

breed. Other ocean wanderers are more challenging to see and you might need to head out in a boat. Storm petrels are the smallest seabirds, the size of a swallow, and have a delightful habit of using their outstretched legs to patter on the water with their feet as they hover above the surface, to stir up small prey items looking for all the world like a large butterfly. The pirates of this community of seabirds are the jaegers (or skuas if you hail from the Northern hemisphere). These close relatives of the gulls chase other birds who have just caught a meal and who are probably feeling pretty good about themselves. The jaeger then harries and harasses them mercilessly until they either release their prize and drop it or regurgitate their last meal. The jaeger then swoops down and catches the discarded meal for themselves. The bad boys of the ocean waves.

So next time you see someone peering intently out to sea with a pair of binoculars or a telescope it is probably a tube-nose fan doing a spot of sea watching! - hooked on the drama of these amazing birds who spend their lives out on the ocean wave only coming to land to breed.



Black-browed Albatross

Photo: Greg McLachlan

### Did You Know We Have Planted More than 500 Flannel Flowers?

Peter Nash

We are required to report, on a yearly basis, the numbers of plants that we have planted out at North Head for the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust. What we plant depends upon what plants we have requested of the propagators, what seeds they have successfully found and propagated and the numbers of cuttings that have been successful. As we well know, for many reasons, some sadly do not survive

and others die even after being well established - but that is nature.



North Head Flowers Photo: Peter Nash

For your interest, I have totalled them up for the ten years from 2015-2024 and have put a few totals in the following table.

Total Plants Planted 2015-2024:	20,410
Greatest numbers of species planted:	
Hibbertia diffusa	2,082
Dillwynia retorta	1,591
Grevillea speciosa	994
Ficinia nodosa	980
A few popular species:	
Actinotus helianthii (flannel flowers)	553
Xanthorrhoea sp	451
Banksia aemula	233
Endangered or vulnerable:	
Acacia terminalis var terminalis	209
Eucalyptus camfieldii	20
Places where greatest numbers planted:	
Old oval – western side	3,562
Old oval – eastern side	3,241
North Fort	2,457
Scenic Drive (Pond area)	2,369
Nursery Area	1,840
Child Care Slope	951
North Fort Road	862

Banksia aemula



Photos: Peter Nash

The Pond



Grevillea buxifolia



Kunzea capitata Grevillea buxifolia Thysanotus  
Photos: Peter MacInnis

### Back in Time - Sick Horses at North Head?

Kaye Lee

The following excerpt from the Evening News Wed 17 Aug 1904 paints a sorry picture -  
“The horse has been called the friend of man and all that sort of thing, but it remains for a visit to the Quarantine Station to learn how far the friendship has been stretched. Over the hills at the station three horses graze, when they are not too ill. And if they are not ill, often it is not the fault of their alleged friend-man.



Any experimenting man wants to do in the way of innoculating disease, it is tried on these horses. They have had measles, and scarlet fever, and smallpox, and plague, and it is understood that one has had a snake-bite tried on it for serum experimenting. If an innoculated horse feels half as bad as an innoculated human, these three friends of man are deserving of gratitude or sympathy, or something”<sup>(1)</sup>.

Indeed, this story is corroborated at least in part by Lady Jean Foley, in her book ‘In Quarantine’<sup>(2)</sup>. She reports that in 1899, when NSW was faced with the prospect of bubonic disease jumping quarantine lines, and the importation of a sample of the plague bacillus was denied, then Premier Sir William Lyne gave verbal permission, later ratified formally, to keep, cultivate and inoculate animals with the microbe of the plague. This was to allow microbiologists to devise a way of recognising the disease early. These “plague horses” were stabled in an enclosure above Quarantine Beach, and between 1901 and 1907, a horse reportedly infected with leprosy, was also stabled there.

1. EF Under the Yellow Flag A Day in Quarantine, Three horses; Evening News Wed 17 August 1904 p.7 retrieved from Trove 22/10/2025

2. Foley, JD in Quarantine A History of Sydney’s Quarantine Station 1828-1984, p.91