

Historical Series No. 83

Dr Alexander Matheson (Mat) Morgan (1867-1934).

Part 3 by Penny Paton

Morgan described birds seen from several areas in the autumn of 1927 (Morgan 1927), including a few species from Nepean Bay on Kangaroo Island from 15-18 April and an unusual roosting record of Black-faced Cuckooshrikes. Twenty-two birds roosted in Pyramid Trees *Lagunaria patersonii* at the back of the University of Adelaide oval from early April through May, arriving just before sundown, and an even greater number had used the same trees for roosting in the previous year.

Another short article documented two examples of the nesting of Striped Honeyeaters and Grey Butcherbirds in the same tree in mallee near Wood's Point, River Murray, in September 1927 (Morgan 1928a). Morgan and Sutton, in association with pastoralist Hurtle Morphett, who owned Wood's Point, were surprised that the honeyeaters were not perturbed to be nesting so close to a species with "an evil reputation as a nest-robber." This nesting association between species of Australian birds is now well-known and a study in Western Australia where both Pied and Grey Butcherbirds nested in close proximity to Yellow-throated Miners deduced that the butcherbirds may "benefit from larger invertebrates that are unused and controlled by miners through the exclusion of other insectivores" and that both species benefit from mutual nest protection (Fulton 2008). It seems likely that a similar situation operated for the Striped Honeyeater and Grey Butcherbird. The ever-alert John Sutton picked up that John Mellor had published a note in the SAO a few years previously about finding four young Grey Butcherbirds and three young Striped Honeyeaters being fed by their respective parents in the same bush in mallee near the Victorian border (Sutton 1928).

As he had in the previous spring, Morgan spent many days with John Sutton and other colleagues searching for nests in September and October 1927; he visited Sellick's Beach, Hope Valley, One Tree Hill, Blackwood, Williamstown, Meadows Creek and Wood's Point as we saw above. Also, as in the year before, he accompanied Frank Parsons and, this time, J. Neil McGilp on a 10-day trip to the South East in late October (Parsons 1928). Apart from a description of their route, the article is in the form of an annotated list of birds seen. The main object of this trip was to find breeding waterbirds so they spent time at Bool Lagoon and found nesting Straw-necked and Australian White Ibis, Yellow-billed Spoonbills, Little Black and Little Pied Cormorants, Musk Duck and Purple Swamphen.

On a quick trip to Renmark by car in March 1928, Morgan (1928b) remarked on several bird species. He

noted where the cross-over occurred between White-backed and Black-backed Magpies, which was about Blanchetown. He then documented where he had seen the two types in other parts of South Australia, demonstrating his remarkable record-keeping over several decades of bird-watching. He saw some White-browed Treecreepers, firstly between Truro and Blanchetown and then as far as Renmark and, on the return trip by a different route, he observed them near Sedan, which he considered an enlargement of their known range. A fleeting glimpse of a whistler between Kingston and Blanchetown in thick mallee scrub was thought to be a Red-lored Whistler which is possible given its known distribution at that time, but Gilberts Whistler cannot be excluded. In the next SAO Morgan elaborated on the birds seen on his March trip to Renmark and back, listing all the species seen between the major towns he traversed (SAOA 1928a).

A short note on sightings by Morgan in autumn 1928 at Port Gawler described thousands of waders, including Red-capped Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Greenshank, Red-necked Stint and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (SAOA 1928b). He also elaborated on birds seen on a week-long visit in April 1928 to Kangaroo Island, mainly in the vicinity of Rocky Point, which is near Browns Beach on the Dudley Peninsula, suggesting that he stayed there for the duration (SAOA 1928a).

John Sutton (1929) wrote up a trip made by himself, Dr Morgan and J. Neil McGilp to the South East in November 1928. A brief description of the route and highlights of the birdlife was followed by an annotated list of all species seen. Due to recent rain the main road from Kingston to Lucindale was unpassable so they detoured via Robe, Lake Eliza, Lake Hawdon and Reedy Creek. One morning they explored St Helena Swamp, southwest of Lucindale, where they found nesting Black Swan, Purple Swamphen, Australasian Bittern, Musk Duck, Swamp Harrier and Little Grassbird. At Konetta Homestead they were hosted by the owners, Mr and Mrs John Watson, and Mr Watson took them to a teatree swamp near "Frog Island", a slight elevation. Here there was a heronry of about 2000 Nankeen Night Herons with 100 occupied nests. The recently inundated country was pockmarked by millions of yabby holes and the remains of yabbies littered the water beneath the teatrees, indicating that the herons were eating the yabbies.

On the October 1928 trip to Wood's Point, Morgan and Sutton were driven across a paddock on Mr Hurtle Morphett's land when they put up a Spotted Nightjar. They searched for a nest with no success and on the

next day returned and drove the same route and marked the place where the nightjar flushed again. On searching this spot, a nightjar chick was found and, on picking it up to observe it more closely, it emitted a squeak which brought the parent bird to within 25 feet, where it performed the wounded bird actions (Morgan 1929a). Morgan had not previously seen or read a description of the young of the Spotted Nightjar. A page of the handwritten account of this note is replicated in Figure 6, to provide an example of Morgan's handwriting.

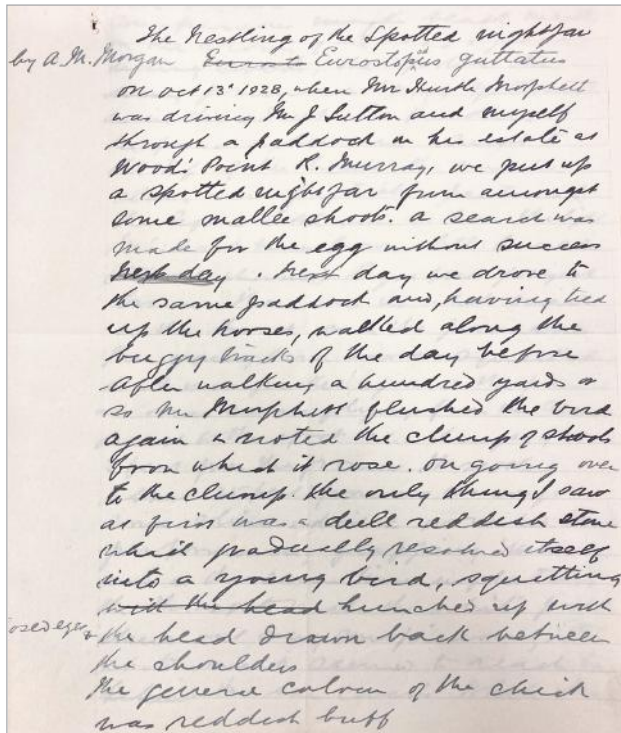


Figure 6. An example of Dr Morgan's handwriting – a page from his SAO note on the nesting of the Spotted Nightjar (from SAOA Archives in SLSA)

Later in the same SAO Morgan (1929b) provided a brief account of an outing to Yorke Peninsula in late December 1928. It documented the bird species seen between Port Wakefield and Ardrossan, Ardrossan and Gleeson's Landing, and birds seen at the last-named place as well as at Pondalow Bay. Morgan again visited Kangaroo Island in May 1929, providing just a list of birds seen at various locations, including a captive Cape Barren Goose at Rocky River (SAOA 1929).

Morgan (SAOA 1930) provided notes on a number of bird species, including nesting birds, from Sellick's Beach, Buckland Park, Mannum, Meadows Creek and the Adelaide city. During November and December 1929 three nests of the White-browed Woodswallow were found in the city, including one near the University Oval, and two of these successfully fledged young.

Sutton (1930a) again wrote up a trip taken by a group of ornithologists, including Dr Morgan, this time to the property of Mr L. Parsons, presumably a relative of Frank Parsons who was one of the party. Edwin Ashby and his son Keith also attended the five-day foray to Sugarloaf Park, in the triangle between Meningie,

McGraths Flat and Coonalpyn, an area of heath on sand with a few mallees on the sandy rises. The party recorded 99 bird species, presumably being the total of all birds seen on the return trip from Adelaide.

The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union met in Adelaide in 1929 and the campout following the congress was held in the Coorong. Sutton (1930b) wrote up the trip from 11 to 17 October which was attended by seven SAOA members, including Dr Morgan. The 17 attendees visited the Pelican and Wild Dog Islands in the Coorong, freshwater lakes east of Salt Creek, a cutting-grass (*Gahnia* sp.) swamp en route to the lakes as well as areas southeast of Salt Creek on the way to the Washpool. The ornithologists of this era were very good at finding nests and they found 935 nests of 51 species over the six days, as well as recording 117 species for the whole trip. There were about 200 Pelican nests on the Pelican Islands, as well as nesting Black Swan, Silver Gull and Pied Cormorant. Sutton and Morgan waded to the Wild Dog Islands where they found nesting Silver Gull and 15 Fairy Tern nests. Highlights included a single Malleefowl, nesting White-backed Swallow and nesting Slender-billed Thornbill. Several papers read before the Adelaide Congress were published in the *Emu*, but it is silent on the Salt Creek campout, apart from a comment that "the ladies of the party will occupy the accommodation house and the men will sleep under canvas" (Anon. 1929).

During 1929 and 1930 Morgan continued to contribute to the Bird Notes section of the SAO, with records from Williamstown, Sellick's Beach, Meadows Creek, Buckland Park and closer to home in his own garden and the parklands in North Adelaide. He was one of a party on a motor launch trip to the islands near the Murray Mouth in April 1930, which Sutton (1930c) again wrote up.

A longer trip was taken by Dr Morgan over nearly three weeks in July and August of 1930 to Clifton Hills Station with the lessee Mr E.A. Brooks (Morgan 1930). This was quite an epic trip, necessitating taking two trains (the East-West express and the Alice Springs train) as far as Marree, then a long and difficult car journey via Lake Harry, Dulkaninna, Etadinna, Mungeranie, Mirra Mitta and Mount Gason to Clifton Hills. A breakdown saw Morgan and Brooks camping on a sandhill while the driver walked 20 miles for help. The next leg of the journey saw them bogged and lost in the dusk so they camped out again, this time in a dry swamp. On the next day they got as close to the station homestead as they could by car and then rode the last 5 miles on horseback. At this time the Diamantina River near the homestead was 120 yards wide and still flowing swiftly, following a flood. In contrast to the wet conditions around Goyders Lagoon, the country between the Cooper and the Diamantina was in a deplorable state, there having been no rain for six years.

A horseback trip over three days saw them exploring Cooncherie [Koonchera] Waterhole, part of Goyders Lagoon where Pelicans were nesting and Candoonie Waterhole. They visited Lake Uloowaranie on the way

back to where they had left their car and thence on to Ooroowilanie, Marree, Lake Letty homestead and the dry River Frome. Morgan was surprised not to see any whitefaces or the Crested Bellbird on this trip, but he did record 92 species of birds and found many species nesting. Seven duck species were seen, including Plumed Whistling Duck, Pacific Black Duck, Chestnut-breasted Shelduck, Pink-eared Duck and Hardhead and breeding Maned Duck and Grey Teal. Although Dr Morgan did not recognise them, a fellow traveller indicated that two pigeons seen at Goyders Lagoon were Flock Pigeons, which were once in "their thousands...in the district" (Morgan 1930). Other groups of birds that Morgan considered to be scarce were the parrots and the honeyeaters.

Early in the next year, Morgan was again up north in company with J. Neil McGilp, as they travelled to Lake Callabonna to see a nesting colony of Banded Stilts (McGilp and Morgan 1931, Morgan 1931). The stiltery was in the southern portion of the lake, known locally as Lake Mulligan, which was about 250 m long and up to 5-6 m high in the middle, with mud spits at either end. On 11 January 1931 they estimated the number of nests to be 27,000 and the number of eggs at 81,000, with clutch size varying from one to five. When the Moolawatana Station manager, Rex McKay, visited the breeding colony on 19 December 1930 no eggs were present, but on a subsequent visit on 29 December some nests contained five eggs. By 21 January there were many recently hatched chicks, suggesting that the incubation period was about 28 days. The article is well illustrated by photos of eggs, showing the wide variety of coloration, and portions of the colony, showing adults, chicks and eggs. This was only the second observation of Banded Stilt nesting ever recorded, the first being about six months earlier, from Lake Grace near Kukerin in Western Australia, where there were estimated to be about 40,000 pairs (Pedler 2017).

The second article described their trip to Moolawatana Station via Jamestown, Nilpena and Beltana, and the return trip through Mount Serle, Sliding Rock, Beltana, Hookina and Port Augusta (Morgan 1931). One hundred and three bird species were recorded and many species were breeding on Lake Callabonna and Broken Swamp on Moolawatana. These included Hoary-headed Grebe, Whiskered and Gull-billed Tern, Black-winged Stilt, Red-necked Avocet and Pink-eared Duck, as well as the afore-mentioned Banded Stilt.

In the spring of 1931, late in September, Morgan had the opportunity of spending a week at Paratoo Station, between Nackara and Yunta as a guest of Mr and Mrs Byron McLachlan (Morgan 1932a). Byron left a career in medicine for jackarooing at Paratoo and at the age of 19 became manager of the station in about 1919 (www 3). The season of 1931 was a good one and the grass, saltbush and other groundcovers were healthy, but birds were not as plentiful as Morgan had expected. He recorded 64 species, with many species nesting,

including Stubble Quail, Banded Plover, Chestnut-breasted Shelduck, Little Eagle, Cockatiel, Owllet Nightjar, Fairy Martin, Yellow-throated Miner and Grey Butcherbird. A descendant of Dr Morgan's by marriage described him holding his hat up to Mr McLachlan, whose job it was to climb the trees to bring down the eggs for Mat's collection.



Figure 7. Photograph of Paratoo Homestead 1934 (courtesy of SLSA, B18329/1)

As a footnote to this article, correspondence from Byron McLachlan to Dr Morgan dated 2 January 1932 described large numbers of Budgerigars flying roughly north over the Paratoo homestead at dawn for several hours (McLachlan 1932). He estimated that over the next three hours there was hardly a break in their flight and that one to ten million were passing every ten minutes which gives an estimate of between 18 and 180 million birds. This was during a period of extreme and extended high temperatures in the interior of Australia (for example at Oodnadatta the 51 days from December 15 1931 averaged 110° Fahrenheit (43.3° Centigrade) and one or two days were 122° (50°) (Anon 1932a). Bird mortality was very high at many locations so one can only imagine that the fate of the millions of Budgerigars was not a happy one. Indeed a later note in the SAO estimated that millions of Budgerigars had died at Kokatha Station near Kingoonya early in 1932 where, just from one dam, five tons of birds were removed and from one tank, 30,000 Budgerigars (Anon 1932b).

Next Morgan (1932b) wrote a disturbing article on the destruction of Wedge-tailed Eagles, which suggested that such actions were not unusual for the time. He did not question the actions of pastoralists in killing such large numbers of eagles nor did the newspapers of the day resile from publishing such accounts. Morgan mentioned a press article from May 1930 describing the trapping of large numbers of eagles at Koonoona Station near Burra but, when he wrote to the owner asking for weights and measurements, he replied that the birds had left the district and he should write to the manager of Koonamore Station where eagles were being trapped in large numbers. In response to Morgan's request, the manager sent him the details of 43 birds, which Morgan compared with other published information to gauge the average weight and wing spread of Wedge-tailed Eagles.

Another short paper discussed spurs on the wing bones of birds (Morgan 1932c). Fully developed spurs occur in only the Masked Lapwing among Australian birds but also in a few species of several families worldwide. Rudimentary spurs do occur in many species of Australian birds that Morgan examined, with the exception of penguins, the Emu and the Cassowary. The rudimentary spur takes the form of a knob, the summit of which is bare of feathers and covered with skin which is somewhat thicker than on the rest of the wing. Morgan surmised that in flying birds this bony process would serve as a lever for the stronger extension of the wing, but of course in non-flying birds such as penguins and Emus, this would be irrelevant.

Morgan wrote up the discovery of a small population of the introduced Grenadier Weaver *Euplectes* (formerly *Pyromelana*) *orix* near Wood's Point on the River Murray between Murray Bridge and Tailm Bend (Morgan 1933a). On 22 October 1932 he and John Sutton were shown four of a flock of about 15 to 20 birds that were feeding daily on wild oats on the reclaimed flats. Sutton was later told of a pair of weavers building a nest in a reedbed at Paradise; both populations were believed to be derived from aviary escapees and had the potential to establish wild populations. At the January 1933 meeting of the Association, a letter about the weavers was tabled from the Commonwealth Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (the forerunner of the CSIRO) and Dr Morgan and the President were empowered to deal with the matter.

A few weeks later Morgan took a 480 mile journey from Adelaide to Mannahill and back (Morgan 1933b). The country was dry northeast of Paratoo and this, combined with the mid-November time frame, resulted in only 46 species of birds being recorded. Despite his non-appearance at the AGM on 31 March 1933 and expressions of sympathy being offered to Dr Morgan on his illness (Anon 1933b), Morgan visited Hope Valley Reservoir with his old friend Dr Chenery on 25 September of that year. They found a nest with four young of the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, a species not found in South Australia and therefore assumed to be a cage escapee (Chenery 1933). An Editor's note recorded that the Grenadier Weaver had nested in this same area of the reservoir in 1932.

I assume that due to ill health, the last two notes attributed to Dr Morgan, on cuckoos (Morgan 1933c) and treecreepers (Morgan 1934), are taken from his field notes. The cuckoo notes detailed specimens of four species taken by him in the Gawler Ranges in August 1923 and the treecreeper notes detailed specimens of four species taken by him in various parts of Australia in 1919, 1921 and 1923. One gets the feeling that he was putting his affairs in order at a time when he was perhaps unable to leave home. His death on 18 October 1934 was marked by his obituary by Dr Chenery in the pages of the SAO in the first part of Volume 13 in January 1935 (Chenery 1935). Other obituaries appeared in the *Records of the South Australian*

Museum, Annual Reports of the Board of Governors of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery and the Emu (Blaylock 2000).

The *Emu* obituary (White 1935) recorded the debt owed to Dr Morgan by South Australian ornithology and the pleasant companionship enjoyed by the two ornithologists and their peers. White singled out Dr Morgan's championship of the trinomial system of bird taxonomy (which set South Australian ornithology apart from much of the rest of Australia at that time) and also the great service bestowed by Morgan as Honorary Ornithologist at the South Australian Museum. Morgan took up this position in 1922 on the death of the Museum Ornithologist F.R. Zietz (Blaylock 2000) which also coincided with Morgan's disposal of his private medical practice (White 1935). As museum Honorary Ornithologist Morgan was instrumental, with the Zietzes and John Sutton, in building the foundations of its comprehensive bird collection and keeping South Australian ornithology at the forefront of scientific investigation (Schodde 2000). Morgan often led discussions of groups of birds at SAOA meetings and used the skin specimens from the Museum for illustration. This was a time before easy-to-use field guides with excellent illustrations that we have become accustomed to.

Morgan was not a founding member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) according to the list published at the end of the first volume of *Emu*, but was probably a member in 1905, although he did not attend the Adelaide Congress nor the campout on Kangaroo Island in that year (Truran 2000). As Truran (2000) also noted he published little in *Emu*, despite a long membership, preferring the local journal. His earliest note in *Emu* was about Welcome Swallows nesting in natural breeding spots like caves, hollow gum stumps and gorges before they adapted to European buildings (Morgan 1906). This note is instructive as it shows how interested and knowledgeable he was about birds as a young child. He documents seeing a swallow nest in a cave in the hills behind Mitcham in 1874 or 1875 when he was about seven or eight and on every subsequent visit until 1906 there was an occupied nest there.

Morgan's only other contributions to *Emu* were a co-authored paper later in his life and three brief notes, written in response to what he regarded as poor ornithology and supporting Truran's (2000) assertion that Morgan had an ambivalent relationship with the RAOU. His responses were well-reasoned and based on his own careful observations and discussions with other SAOA members. He was particularly scathing about the naming of new species by some RAOU members based on just a few specimens and with little comparative material to support their arguments. His attitude softened a few years later and he did attend the Ninth Congress in Adelaide and was elected to the RAOU Council in 1910, although they appeared to make little use of his skills during his term on Council (Truran 2000).