

Historical Series No 82.

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

Part 2 by Penny Paton

As well as being one of the founding members of the SAOA, Morgan was President for the first two years and, on the SAO's inception in 1914, served on the first Editorial Committee of four members, initially Morgan, F.R. Zietz, S.A. White and Robert Crompton. Morgan went on to serve another four terms as President (1907-08, 1916-17, 1925-26, 1931-32), preceded by the Vice-Presidency as custom dictated. After serving a four-year term on the Editorial Committee, Morgan was replaced on 26 April 1918 by Alfred Edquist.

Morgan was a prolific contributor to the SAO, beginning in the first part with a note on the method by which Mistletoebirds deposit sticky mistletoe seed on branches (Morgan 1914b). Even this short note hints at the qualities of Morgan's ornithological endeavours: accurate recording of date, location and events some years later, demonstrating that his record-keeping was first-rate. The analysis of the mechanics of the Mistletoebird's actions and the physical characteristics of the seed also indicate the workings of his scientific mind.

Morgan made several trips with Captain S.A. White in the motor launch, the "Avocet", at the invitation of its owners, A.G. and E.S. Rymill. During the first in early January 1916, they explored the Spit on Kangaroo Island, the Althorpe Islands, Pondalowie Bay, Wedge Island and Troubridge Island, but due to poor weather were unable to land on the Pages or Gambier Island as planned (Morgan 1916a). The second trip was over Easter 1916, when bad weather again hampered their plans to access Dangerous Reef and the Sir Joseph Banks Group, but they did do some dredging near Stansbury and explored Pondalowie Bay and Althorpe Island (Morgan 1916b). The reports on these excursions show his rigour in observation and

record-keeping as well as his interest in seabirds and conservation. On one of the smaller of the Althorpe Islands group Morgan and White found the dried carcasses of a number of seals as well as a rifle cartridge shell and he bemoaned the senseless killing of these harmless animals (Morgan 1916a). A feature of both these papers is the recording of the temperatures of seabirds, although Morgan does not say why he thought that this was of interest or to what use the data could be put.



Figure 3. Main street of Port Broughton 1914 showing railway lines (SLSA PRG 280/1/13/289)

As well as reports of ornithological trips, Morgan also wrote about the ecology and movement of birds. For example, an early paper on the migration of swallows and martins summarised the patchy information on the movements of the four species in Australia, as well as reporting his own observations and those of his colleagues (Morgan 1916c). The general consensus was that the Welcome Swallow and Tree Martin were more common in southern Australia in the spring and summer, but that some birds remained, especially in milder winters, when most migrated to warmer

climes to the north. The Fairy Martin was the most migratory of the four species, with few observers noting any in the autumn and winter. Morgan noted the arrival of Fairy Martins in the Adelaide region in September and commented that he had never seen them after 1 April. Further north he considered Fairy Martins migratory at Laura (where he lived for about five years in the mid-1890s) and at Wirrabarra, but while they occurred each year at the latter place, they were not seen every year at Laura. His experience of the White-backed Swallow was fairly similar, although less common around Adelaide,

where they were not seen from April to August. At Laura birds came to breed in September and left no later than April, but further north at Port Augusta this species was resident.

Morgan published a short article on a visit to Port Broughton, in the spring of 1917 and, apart from the details of the 70 species of birds recorded, he painted a picture of what this area looked like at that time (Morgan 1918a). Dense mallee had been replaced by wheat fields except for the roadsides and a few small scrub patches, the largest of which was Clements Gap of about 100 acres, 15 miles (25km) from the township. He appreciated the mangrove-dominated island and creek, a large sapphire swamp and a patch of acacia and sheoak scrub near the township. Near the creek Morgan collected a pair of Slender-billed Thornbills that he recognised as being different from those from western and central Australia. This was prescient of him as birds found along Gulf St Vincent are classified as the subspecies *Acanthiza iredalei rosinae*, first described by Mathews in 1913 from specimens collected at Outer Harbour (Matthew 1994).

Figures 3 and 4 show images of Port Broughton at about the time Morgan was there. The hotel was established in 1875 by Mr Edward Wall and his son William added the second storey in 1910. Morgan paid tribute to the hospitality and assistance of the landlord of the hotel during his visit. The jetty was built in 1876 and serviced by a railway line for grain haulage from Mundooora, 16km inland. Port Broughton figured again in an article by Morgan regarding nesting cormorant (Morgan 1918b). In early May 1918 Morgan, his wife and son (presumably his elder son William who would have been about 11 at this time and already an SAOA member) travelled to Port Broughton, where he had heard that the Pied Cormorants were nesting on Shag Island. Mr Wall Junior sailed them out near the island and then rowed them in a dinghy, after which the party waded for a quarter of a mile to the mangroves. Mrs Morgan must have been a redoubtable character, not least to put up with the pot pourri of smells at the cormorant rookery – a mixture of excrement and disgorged fish. The rookery covered about two acres (just under a hectare) with nests placed in mangroves, many of which were leafless and apparently dying. On their approach, the young disgorged the fish in their stomachs and, if old

enough, dropped to the mud and waddled off towards the water. Morgan identified a number of fish species that the cormorants were feeding to their young and gave very detailed descriptions of the young at all ages. He also took photos and illustrated the article with a view of part of the rookery with nests and young just out of the nest.

The rest of the article detailed a 2-day trip to Mundoo Island with the same party, who stayed a night at a shooting hut on Ram Island. Contrary to what Morgan was told, that Great Cormorants were nesting on Mundoo Island, it was in fact a mixed rookery of the Little Pied and the Little Black Cormorants. While the two species mingled, they tended to nest in small groups of the same species, with only the occasional interloper. On approach the young disgorged their fish and dropped to the water and swam away. The main species of fish fed to the young was carp, which Morgan indicated had become very common in the river and lakes in recent years.

Morgan (SAOA 1919) described at a meeting on 28 February 1919 that he had made a pair of collapsible scales that could be packed into a small space for travelling. He had found it difficult to buy such scales which he required for weighing the brains of birds. During the month-long trip to the South East alluded to above (Morgan 1919), he put the scales to good use, weighing all the birds he collected and their brains, as well as the eggs he collected. His object in weighing the brains was to discover what percentage of a bird's weight was taken up by the brain, but he noted that he would need to weigh many more specimens before any conclusions could be drawn. He published the weight of about 40 bird

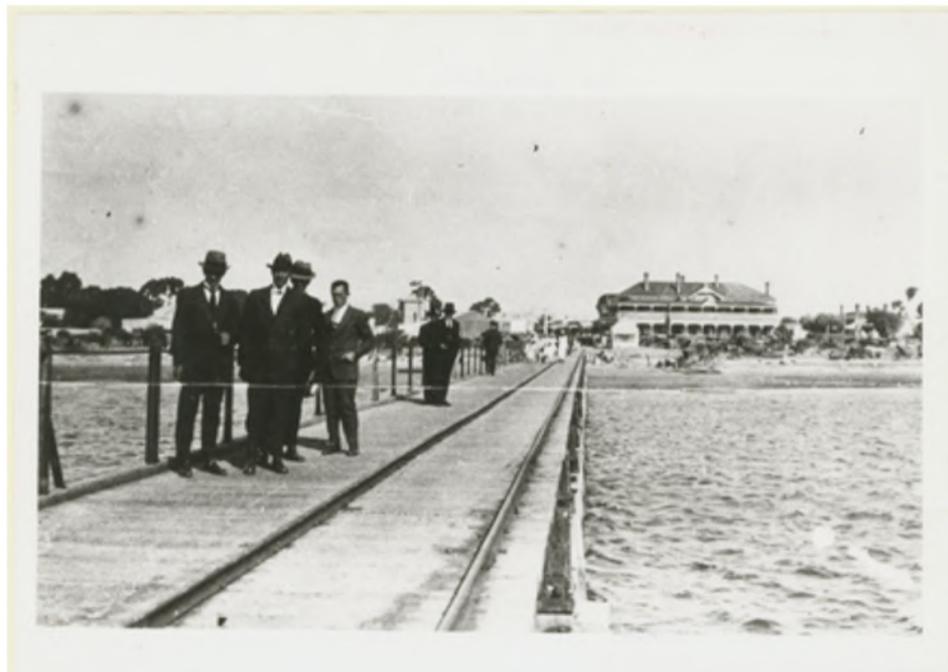


Figure 4. Jetty and Hotel, Port Broughton ca 1910 (SLSA B15350)

specimens and 14 egg clutches, as well as giving the weight of individual eggs in these clutches. He estimated that a female Beautiful Firetail lost about 10% of her body weight each time she laid an egg and, as she laid one per day for seven days, he concluded that egg-laying is a considerable strain on a female bird (Morgan 1919).

A further note in the *SAO* (Morgan 1920) detailed the weight of 16 birds and their brains as well as their temperatures. These were of birds collected on a trip with his friend Dr Chenery to the southwest corner of New South Wales. In a further short article Morgan gave the weights of birds and their brains as well as their temperature, length and wing span from specimens collected on a trip to the Lennard River, WA, in 1921 (Morgan 1922a). He did not publish the results of his research into the weight of birds and their brains but modern-day scientists have concluded that, among Australian songbirds, the Magpie and corvids “are royalty as far as brain size, relative to body weight, is concerned” (Kaplan 2021). However top of the list are the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and a few allies amongst Southern Hemisphere parrots.

The afore-mentioned trip with Dr Chenery took them to that part of New South Wales between the River Darling and the South Australian border in October 1919 (Chenery and Morgan 1920a, Chenery and Morgan 1920b, Chenery 1922). Chenery had lived for some years at Wentworth and it was an area that the pair had explored on several trips together, while Morgan had also visited part of the area with Captain White. The first visit in 1917 coincided with a flood year and the third in 1919 was a dry year so they were able to compare the avifauna under different conditions. For example, very few Budgerigars were seen in the spring of 1919, whereas in 1917 they were present in hundreds of thousands (Chenery and Morgan 1920b).

Although not generally discussed by other sources, it seems that Dr Morgan dabbled in bird photography, as an incident related in the *SAO* attests (*SAOA* 1921c). At an *SAOA* meeting, Morgan related an amusing incident when he was photographing an Australasian Grebe nest on a small overflow of the Sturt River near Morphettville. His head was under the hood while he was engaged in photographing the nest when he felt some half-digested fish and other food land on his neck. On looking up he discovered that he was underneath the nest of a White-faced Heron, the young of which had vomited over him.

This mention of photography led me to investigate photos in the *South Australian Ornithologist* and I found that, after a few photos in Parts 7 and 8 of Volume 3 in 1918, the next ones did not appear until Volume 11 Part 2 in April 1931 – copious images of the historic breeding of Banded Stilts on Moolawatana Station in December 1930 (McGilp and Morgan 1931). After this, photographs appeared irregularly and uncommonly. This contrasts with *Emu*, which published photos from its inception in Volume 1 in 1901-02. Presumably cost was the limiting factor for the

SAOA in its early days with a very small membership and income.

Photography is mentioned again in Morgan’s (1921d) account of a trip to WA with his wife from Fremantle to Derby and then on to Meda and Kimberley Downs Stations during June 1921. At Kimberley Downs Morgan spent most of his time observing and collecting birds and insects along the Lennard River and on a nearby swamp he was so absorbed in watching a pair of Black-necked Storks catching frogs that he forgot to take a photo. He was largely unimpressed with the birdlife on this trip or the towns of Broome and Derby, particularly the hotel they stayed in at the latter place for three days. He was grateful to a Mr H. Monger who took them crabbing at the Derby jetty, where walking fish and scarlet and black fighting crabs abounded, and where a crocodile track in the mangroves precluded exploration of this habitat. The weeks spent on Meda and Kimberley Downs Stations were more productive and Morgan was appreciative of the help provided by the managers Mr G. Millard and Mr Chalmers.

Part II of Morgan’s (1922b) account of his North West trip is short and details birds seen at the end of their stay on Kimberley Downs Station as well as summarising birds seen over the whole month. Their return trip from Derby to Fremantle was most unpleasant as the S.S. Gorgon caught on fire out of Broome and, while the fire was contained, cyanide fumes spread through the ship and caused the death of cattle which were thrown overboard. To cap it off, after four days at sea Morgan contracted malaria and was very glad to reach a hotel in Perth three days later.

During the early 1920s Morgan wrote up short descriptions of individual bird species for the *SAO*: the Black-chinned Honeyeater (Morgan 1922c), Little Grassbird (Morgan 1922d), Red-capped Dotterel (Morgan 1923a) and Black-fronted Dotterel (Morgan 1923b). Figure 5 shows a Black-chinned Honeyeater caught and banded at the Santa Rosa Winery on the Fleurieu Peninsula from about 35 years ago. This species has declined enormously in the Adelaide/Mt Lofty Region since Morgan’s day.

Another brief article by Morgan (1922e) described a visit in January (of either 1921 or 1922) to Baudin Rocks, a group of three islands about 3-4 km from the northwest end of Guichen Bay near Robe. He was hoping to find breeding petrels, but decided that the soil on the islands was too shallow to allow for suitable burrows. However, on the first island he did record about two dozen nests of the Black-faced Cormorant, new but mostly empty and surmised, from seeing a Silver Gull eating a cormorant egg, that they had consumed most of the eggs. There was also a colony of thousands of nesting Greater Crested Terns and hundreds of Little Penguins nesting under bushes. On the second island was another “huge colony” of Greater Crested Terns, several Nankeen Night Herons and an old night heron nest containing a dead young bird. He suspected that a pair of Sooty Oystercatchers were



Figure 5. A Black-chinned Honeyeater caught at Santa Rosa Winery near Currency Creek, ca 1988 (Photo: D. Paton)

breeding and a colony of Silver Gulls were at the end of their nesting season. More recent fieldwork on Baudin Rocks found a breeding pair of Bridled Terns among a colony of Greater Crested Terns in the summer of 1968-69 (Bonnin 1969) and sight records continued there until 1975 (Christie 2003).

Morgan's interest in seabirds is also attested by short articles on two skins of shearwaters, one found beach-washed at Port Willunga by Edwin Ashby in 1914 and the other in the SAMA (Morgan 1923a, b). The first he thought was a Fluttering Shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*), but was puzzled by its being a young bird and there were no known breeding locations in South Australia (and we now know that this species only breeds in New Zealand). His second bet, that it was a Short-tailed Shearwater, is the more likely explanation. The second specimen, collected by E.R. Waite from the Neptune Islands, was similar to a new species *P. intermedius* described by Bassett Hull (now accepted as the Short-tailed) or even a Wedge-tailed Shearwater. It is almost certain to have been a Short-tailed as there are breeding colonies of this species in South Australia.

Morgan's publishing flurry continued in 1924 with a short note on the nests and eggs of the Western (formerly the Thick-billed) Grasswren *Amytornis textilis myall* (Morgan 1924). This subspecies was not reported until 1902 (Chenery 1903) and Morgan's description of the nest and eggs was the earliest. Morgan (1924) explained that Mathews was the first to describe this taxon in 1916 from two skins collected from Myall Creek on Cariewerloo Station in the Gawler Ranges. The nest Morgan described was found by J.Neil McGilp on 30 August 1923 in a saltbush near Wertigo Dam about 80 km northwest of Port Augusta. The open cup nest was constructed of dried grass and scantily lined with rabbit fur and there were three eggs in the nest.

Another short note was published by Morgan (1926) on the collection of quailthrushes, a male at Wipipippee south of

Lake Gairdner in August 1902 and three birds near Kimba in September 1925. He noted that these were different from the typical Chestnut-backed Ground-bird of the Murray Mallee and designated them as *Cinclosoma castanotum clarum*. This taxon was later submerged in synonymy or ambiguity until its reinstatement by Schodde and Mason in 1999 for a form that occurred in Central Australia and the Great Victoria Desert (Black *et al.* 2019). A later review recognised two sister species: the Chestnut and the Copperback Quailthrushes (the latter with two subspecies), but Black *et al.* (2019) proposed a third subspecies of the Copperback Quailthrush, *C. clarum morgani* for the population on Eyre Peninsula and in the Gawler Ranges. This is a just reward for Morgan's perspicacity in recognising the more highly coloured birds he collected as something different as well as noting the limited sexual

dimorphism, a character that differentiates this subspecies from *C.c. fordianum* of southwestern Western Australia and South Australia.

Volume 8 Part 7 of the SAO focussed on the birds of Kangaroo Island and Morgan (1926) listed species seen on a trip between Kingscote and Rocky River via Kelly Hill from 20 - 25 May 1926. Most notable were the seabirds seen off Rapid Head, in Backstairs Passage and along the coast between Kingscote and Hog Bay (now Penneshaw): namely Fluttering Shearwater, Giant Petrel, Brown Skua and Arctic Skua.

Morgan accompanied Frank Parsons and John Sutton on a week's trip to the South East in late October/early November 1926 (Sutton 1927a). A number of specimens were taken on this trip and, as Sutton was not a collector, we can surmise that the collecting was done by Morgan and Parsons. The article ended with a list of additional species recorded by Dr Morgan in the Robe district, indicating that he had visited the district more than once. Morgan spent quite a lot of time in the field in the spring of 1926 with John Sutton and sometimes Frank Parsons; there are numerous nesting notes from Meadows, Blackwood, Goolwa, Happy Valley, Wood's Point, Sellick's Beach and a swamp near Adelaide (Sutton 1927b). Sutton and Morgan also spent time exploring the River Torrens environs near the city on 30 September and 1 October looking for nesting birds, after Morgan and his son had seen an Azure Kingfisher near the north bank of the River between Frome Road and the city on the previous day.

Returning to seabirds, Morgan published with J.B. Cleland an account of albatrosses and other birds seen in January 1927 between Melbourne and Dunedin, New Zealand, where they attended a medical conference (Morgan and Cleland 1927). Both men found seabird identification from the boat very difficult and were only confident in their sighting of the Black-browed Albatross, Cape Petrel, Australasian Gannet and, on the return trip from Wellington to Sydney, of two Red-tailed Tropicbirds.