

# **SAOA Historical Series No. 19**

## **Worsley C. Johnston (b. 1902)**

There are five letters in the SAOA Correspondence Files from Worsley Johnston to John Sutton (see Historical Series No. 1), variously addressed as Secretary of SAOA or Assistant Ornithologist, SA Museum. Bill Matheson, who met Johnston in the 1960s at a Department of Agriculture training course, has provided me with some biographical information and a couple of anecdotes, which helped to inform the next three paragraphs and for which I am very grateful.

Worsley Clifton Johnston was born at Albany on 27 April 1902, the youngest of ten children and studied at Roseworthy Agricultural College, graduating with a Diploma in Agriculture in 1922 as the top student and winning two prizes including the Gold Medal for academic achievement. His long career with the Department of Agriculture as an agricultural instructor and adviser began in February 1928. He was stationed at Riverton in the early 1930s and geographically widespread bird observations from 1931 onwards from the mid North show that he travelled widely through the district, presumably with his employment. The letters from 1933 and 1934 are all written from Riverton and his letter of 20 February 1934 is on Department of Agriculture letterhead. A reference in the *SA Ornithologist* (*SA Orn*) from 1938 gives his address as Kybybolite in the South-East of the state, so presumably he moved there in the intervening period. Johnston enlisted on 4 May 1942 and was discharged on 7 January 1946. Subsequently he was stationed at Port Lincoln.

Worsley Johnston was a highly regarded naturalist with a particular interest in marine molluscs and several of his new discoveries were named after him. He was clearly a competent bird observer and Sutton had no qualms about printing his observations in the *Ornithologist*. An anecdote from Bill Matheson from their meeting in the 1960s tells of Johnston helping Bill to identify an immature Pacific Gull from Roseworthy College's complete set of

Mathew's 'The Birds of Australia'! Johnston was also indirectly responsible for Bill's interest in birds. A colleague of Bill's, Reg French, was required to patrol the North West pastoral areas during the 1955-56 locust plague and Johnston suggested to him that an interest in birds would help relieve the monotony. Reg took his advice and passed on his interest to John Potter, who later worked with Bill in Jamestown and involved him in bird watching.

Family details about Worsley Johnston are sketchy. Bill believes that he had two daughters while one of the letters mentions that he and his boys can usually find a Barn Owl or two in the Lower North, which suggests that he had at least two sons.

In the batch of correspondence forming the basis for the Historical Series, Johnston's first letter of 26 June 1933 announces that he is interested in ornithology and asks about procedures for taking bird specimens. Although he doesn't like shooting birds, he finds that it is difficult to be sure of the species without handling them. He goes on to talk about bird books, indicating that he has Cayley, Leach and Robert Hall's 'A Key to the Birds of Australia', that he thinks is out of date. One can sympathize with his difficulties in identification — anyone of a certain age who has tried to use Cayley in particular will understand his frustration.

He appears to have already started collecting, as he describes a Musk Lorikeet that he has skinned and preserved using alum, noting that it does not agree with Cayley's picture. Johnston makes noises about the probable need to join the SAOA or similar organisation and includes a bird note on three Black-shouldered Kites seen at Tarlee, asking if this is unusual. If John Sutton (JS) needs to check his credentials, he suggests that he talk to Edwin Ashby or Erhard Boehm of Sutherlands. We learn from a paper in the *SA Orn* by Erhard Boehm that Johnston knew him, as they visited the Annadale and Sandleton districts together in October 1933 (Boehm 1934).

We know that JS replied to all the letters as there are carbon copies, with the date he received the letters and his date of reply pencilled at the top of Worsley's originals. In his usual helpful style, JS sends Johnston a copy of 'Instructions for Skinning Birds' but points out that the Department of Fisheries and Game are disinclined to issue permits at present. JS goes on to express his opinion of the bird books, being fair to Cayley in describing the good and bad points of his book. He replies to the query on Kites, asking for dates of sightings, encloses the last issue of *SAOrn* and announces that he is happy to answer questions on ornithology.

Letter 2 of 14 July 1933 thanks JS for his reply and includes information on kites, other birds and Barn Owl sightings, including a large number of dead ones. Johnston announces his intention of making records of the birds he sees in the Lower North, which he will send to the *SAOrn*. Sutton's reply indicates that he will be pleased to accept bird notes and that his notes on the kites arrived just in time to be added to *SAOrn* which was at the printers. He adds that every winter the SA Museum receives dead Barn Owls with empty stomachs but the cause of death is a mystery. JS sends some parts of the *SAOrn* for free which he hopes will be of interest.

In Johnston's third letter of 29/1/34 he thanks JS for the *SAOrn* parts and reiterates his intention to become a subscriber. His immediate interest though is to get hold of a copy of Sutton's list of South Australian birds; he has been trying to compile such a list from Leach and Cayley's books but is having difficulties. A further endeavour would be to compile a checklist for the different species, but he realises that this would be even more difficult. He finishes with a story about a friend from Western Australia who has promised to send him a bird that he believes to be the Noisy Scrub Bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) but "it is useless counting the chickens". There is no further mention of this bird or his friend in later letters.

Sutton replied a week later, sending a copy of the *SAOrn* with the latest SA list and commenting that the knowledge of South Australian birds would not permit such a checklist just yet but JS hopes "in the near

future" to do so. JS urges Johnston to help by choosing an area (radius 5, 10, 15 or 20 miles) and recording all birds there as well as any seen outside. His advice to his Western Australian friend is to inject formalin in both ends of the bird for preservation. This last advice no doubt follows too many unfortunate experiences with very smelly birds posted to the Museum (e.g. see Historical Series No. 8. iv and No. 14 iii).

Johnston agrees to make a list of the birds he observes near Riverton in his fourth letter of 20<sup>th</sup> February and tells JS of last week's camping trip along the Wakefield River, during which he saw a small brown bird in the bulrushes. He wonders if this might be a cisticola but the sighting was brief and he is not sure. In pencil at the bottom he enquires about the financial year of the SAOA, although there is no indication that he ever joined the Association. He is certainly not listed in the Members or Subscribers published in the *SAOrn* in April 1935, nor does he or JS mention payment of subscriptions in any letters. Sutton's reply of 26<sup>th</sup> February suggests Reed Warbler, Little Grassbird or cisticola for the mystery bird and gives the calls of all three species. The SAOA membership year begins on 1<sup>st</sup> April while subscription to the *SAOrn* dates from 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. JS reiterates that a list of birds of his district would be very welcome, as well as monthly notes.

The last letter in the series, dated 30 September 1934, is a typed letter taken up with summaries for ten species of bird seen since 1931. These were printed almost verbatim in the *SAOrn* (13 (1), Bird Notes pp 20-21, 1935), except for his description of the Pallid Cuckoo, which JS did not include. For this reason I have included this description:

"This bird is often taken by the public to indicate the approach of spring, but if this was to be so the position of the Agriculture of the state would be in a very precarious state in a great number of years. In 1932 a pair of these birds was seen at Brinkworth on 27<sup>th</sup> April, and another pair at Balakalava (sic.) on the next day. In 1931 they were seen at Saddleworth on 25<sup>th</sup> May, while this year a pair was seen on 22<sup>nd</sup> May at Reeves Plain. In the years mentioned the dates given are the earliest that the birds were

noticed, they were in each season seen at very many localities."

JS's reply to this last letter in the correspondence is especially interesting for it talks about his letter as well as an 'interview', so it seems that the two men met late in 1934. Sutton mentions a matter that was not raised in Johnston's letter of 30 September, namely the leg colour of Eastern Swamphen [now Purple Swamphen] so presumably this was talked about at the meeting. JS ends his letter with a plea for the weight of adult and immature dead snakes, if he comes across any. Sutton was particularly interested in this at the time, as he made the same request to Jack Hood in a letter of exactly the same date 21 October 1934 in reference to the weight a Kookaburra could carry (see Historical Series No. 14 iii).

As mentioned earlier JS included observations from Johnston in the Bird Notes of the *SAOrn* and these are listed at the end of this paper. One record of two Bush Stone-Curlews seen at Saddleworth on 16/8/33 (12 (4) Bird Notes p.132, 1933) alerted me to the existence of a further letter that is in the SAOA general correspondence for 1929 to 1938. I do not have access to the letter as this file has been presented to the Mortlock Library, but a summary of the letter indicates that Johnston thanked JS for the pile of magazines, reported the Stone-Curlews and hoped to join the SAOA one day.

The *SAOrn* reference from the South-East is given in full here:

"On 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1938, in the open Redgum country about two miles from here, I thought I heard the call of the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike (*Pteropodocys maxima*), and then was fortunate enough to see the bird settle in a tree about 100 yards away. On walking quietly towards the bird it flew to the ground and commenced to feed. Still approaching quietly towards the bird it continued to feed and move away from us as one would expect a Silver Gull to act on the beach. By steadily increasing our pace we were able to get within about twenty yards, and so were assured of a close view. We had it under observation for about twenty minutes, and eventually we walked away leaving the Cuckoo-

shrike to its delights. I previously reported the occurrence of this species at Riverton, see "S.A. Orn" Vol. XII, p.182, 1934. (*SAOrn* 1938)

I have also seen a single specimen of the Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus axillaris*) since I have been here. This bird was about the place for a fortnight during last autumn, and appeared to be a lone traveller."

#### Letters in Correspondence:

26/6/33 Riverton, h/w letter to Mr Sutton

29/6/33 JS carbon copy reply

14/7/33 Riverton, h/w letter to Mr Sutton

25/7/33 JS carbon copy reply

(16/8/33 – see below – letter in different batch of SAOA Correspondence)

29/1/34 Riverton, typed letter to JS (in pencil 1<sup>st</sup> Feb; in margin by List of Birds of SA request - posted 1/2/34)

7/2/34 JS carbon copy reply

20/2/34 Riverton, typed letter on Department of Agriculture, South Australia letterhead (at top in ink 23/26)

26/2/34 JS carbon copy reply

30/9/34 Riverton, typed letter to JS (in pencil Oct 4/21)

#### SAOA Correspondence folders 1929-38

16/8/33 Handwritten letter from Worsley C Johnston (Riverton) to JS thanking him for pile of magazines, hoping to join SAOA one day and reporting 2 Stone Curlews on 'last Thursday' at Saddleworth.

#### Bibliography

Boehm, E.F. 1934. Birds of the Annadale and Sandleton Districts, S.A. *SAOrn* 12 (5):163-167.  
Whittell, H.M. 1954. *The Literature of Australian Birds*. Paterson Brokensha Pty Ltd, Perth.

Abridged references of W.C. Johnston's contributions to the *SAOrnithologist*::

1933 *SAOrn* 12 (4): 132

1934 *SAOrn* 12 (5): 181-182

1935 *SAOrn* 13 (1): 20-21

1938 *SAOrn* 14 (7): 199

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