

# **SAOA Historical Series No. 21**

## **Allen F. C. Lashmar (1917-1993)**

### **Part One**

For this 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the Historical Series on Allen Lashmar we have more information than for any of the previous subjects. There are several reasons for this, one being that Allen was born later than many of the previous subjects and therefore more people living today had the opportunity to meet and interact with him. There are also more resources to draw information from; as well as the 1930s letters to John Sutton, Allen kept a birding diary from 1938-40 and 1944-67, which Terry Dennis has kindly made available to me. There is also biographical information drawn together by Ian Mason for his project on egg collectors and a 1993 taped interview with Allen as part of the SAOA's Oral History Project. This wealth of information ensures that there will be several parts to this account of Allen Lashmar and his contribution to Australian ornithology and, more particularly, to our knowledge of Kangaroo Island birds. Allen's name is synonymous with birding on the Island, such that Chris Baxter (1995) dedicated his Annotated List of the Birds of Kangaroo Island to Allen Lashmar:

"In acknowledgement of his lifetime contribution to ornithology on Kangaroo Island and inspiration to others".

Much of the biographical information in the next two paragraphs comes from Ian Mason's brief biography on early oologists compiled in 2004-05 and I am grateful to Ian for allowing me to use this material. Allen Frederick Cooper Lashmar was born into a Kangaroo Island farming family at Marryatville, a suburb of Adelaide, on 22 June 1917 during the Great War. His parents were Frederick James Lashmar, himself born at Antechamber Bay on Kangaroo Island on 9 June 1886, and Annie Louise (nee Hill), born in Adelaide on 8 July 1884. Frederick and Annie were married at Knightsbridge Church in Leabrook on 2 April 1914, two sons were born (Allen in 1917 and Clair in 1919) and Annie died aged 47 at

Antechamber Bay, the location of the family's grazing property – 'Kent' (now 'Kent Park'). Allen's father died at Torrens Park, another suburb of Adelaide, on 18 September 1980, at the age of 94.

Allen's early life at 'Kent' on the far eastern end of Kangaroo Island would have been a very different life from a young child's today. His early schooling from about the age of seven was by correspondence from Adelaide for several years and then at age ten, he attended the local primary school at Cuttlefish Bay, travelling 17 miles there and back on horseback four days a week. On Wednesdays he stayed at home and did set work. Allen described that school as a lot of fun, with boys and girls mixed up. At age 13 or 14 Allen moved to Adelaide and attended Adelaide Boy's High School, where he excelled academically. He found city living restrictive after the freedom of farm life and commented on the difficulties of filling in 'free time' in Adelaide. On his mother's death in June 1932 Allen returned home to help his father run the farm. They ran dairy cows and sheep, with an unsuccessful foray into beef cattle later. In the early days they sold cream in 5 gallon cans to Adelaide, as there was no dairy factory on Kangaroo Island then. They also bred turkeys, as the Wedge-tailed Eagle depredations on the young turkeys, are mentioned in the diary.

Allen married Mildred Ethel Willson at Penneshaw on 4 May 1940, apparently the day that he left Kangaroo Island to enlist in the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF. After training Allen saw service in the Middle East — Egypt, Palestine and Syria — before returning to Queensland and from there made two trips to New Guinea. He was discharged from service in September 1945, with his birding diary beginning again in October 1945. There are a few records from five days in March 1944 and a period in March-April 1945, perhaps the result of visits home. Thereafter Allen lived his life on Kangaroo

Island handing over the farm to his sons in 1978, when he and Mildred retired to Penneshaw.

Like so many youngsters of the day, Allen became interested in birds through the district council's payment of a royalty for sparrow heads and eggs. His memory was that the council paid tuppence for a dozen eggs and threepence for heads – quite an incentive for an eleven year old! Allen's interest in birds was further fostered by being given a box of unlabeled eggs while at school in Adelaide. He took these to the Museum where he met John Sutton, the curator of birds, thus beginning an association that lasted until Sutton's death in 1938. Back on the Island, as a teenager he walked hundreds of kilometres, mainly on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, when he had time off from chores. He estimated that he walked in every direction in an 8 kilometre radius of his home. Information on these rambles and his ornithological discoveries from the period 1934 until his enlistment in 1940 comes from two sources – his letters to John Sutton (January 1934–July 1937) and the diary (January 1938–May 1940). The letters tell of a young boy's developing passion for ornithology, in which Sutton played a pivotal role, from encouragement to join the SAOA and to collect birds' eggs through to advice on bird identification and meticulous data collection and presentation for publication. John Sutton (JS) was the Secretary and Treasurer of the SAOA from 1922 to 1938, Assistant Ornithologist and Ornithologist at the SA Museum between 1923 and 1938 and the subject of Historical Series 1.

The first letter, dated 7 January 1934 and headed 'Kent Farm', Penneshaw, K. I., is written in blue ink on thin lined paper, thanks Sutton for sending him the *Ornithologist* of July 1926 which documents trips to various parts of KI. It also shows that he and his brother Clair were already collecting eggs, as he notes some bird species and that Clair will drop two eggs taken from a hollow into JS for identification. Clair attended Urrbrae Agricultural College in 1934, travelling there from Prospect each day, which limited his opportunities to visit the Museum in office hours. Clair was still being

used as a courier in 1937 but it is unclear whether he was still a student then. Allen also tells JS that he has received a letter from the Director of the SA Museum, informing him that he is too young for Mr Bruce [the Chief Inspector of the Fisheries and Game Department] to issue a collection permit for the Museum. JS's reply letter answers queries about SAOA membership, questions some bird identifications and wonders whether Allen is close enough to the coast for beach walking after a storm to pick up seabirds.

The next part of the correspondence revolves around membership, as Allen enquires about cost, whether the entrance fee is a once-off and how he will he send the fee of one pound to Adelaide. He finally sends the pound in April 1934 and is accepted as a member. JS informs him that he has finally, in May, seen his brother with a box of eggs that Mr McGilp will look at and identify. The other point of note is Sutton's request for Allen to try and interest the lighthouse keeper at Cape Willoughby in bird watching, in particular the annual migration of the mutton birds. Lashmar replies that the head keeper at Cape Willoughby is "very unsociable, being disliked even by the other two keepers on the station who I do not know, so I think that chances of getting them interested are feeble."

In these early letters JS asks that Allen send in bird notes and lists periodically for publication in the *SA Ornithologist* (*SAOrn*). Allen's letter of 9 June encloses a list of birds seen in May, with notes on breeding, abundance and seasonality. JS kindly suggests that he list his birds in checklist order, but Allen replies that he cannot find the checklist order anywhere. Sutton apologises, saying that he thought Allen had the list of South Australian birds, but now realises that he was in error and he is sending one of his last two copies. He also notes that Mr McGilp's paper on hawks will take up the next two editions of the *SAOrn*, so Allen will be able to add to his notes for publication in the edition after those. The letters of the next few months revolve around trying to clear up the identity of birds that Allen is unsure of.

Later in 1934 there is a chance for the two to catch up in person, as Allen is coming to Adelaide on 3 September. Unfortunately JS is going to Lake Alexandrina from 1<sup>st</sup> September but his assistant, Mr Condon, will be able to help him. Allen's letter of 23<sup>rd</sup> September encloses two lists of birds, from Two Wells and from home, as well as beginning:

"Just a line to let you know that I'm back home safely – although somewhat shaken up last Saturday I'm O.K. now." And later in the letter:

"I saw no birds whatever except Cormorants near the Outer Harbour last Saturday 15<sup>th</sup>. Once past the Harbour I took very little interest in anything."

Unfortunately he does not elaborate on what the unsettling event was, but the latter comment indicates that it was possibly rough weather or a boat accident. Periodic holidays to visit a cousin on the Light River near Two Wells from at least 1934 to 1938 gave Allen the opportunity to see birds that were not present or rare on the Island. He describes on tape how the cousin, who lived on the bank of the river, had a wire with a bell on it across the river as a warning device for flooding.

Like many of JS's correspondents, Allen was asked to weigh any snakes that he came across (so that JS could work out the weight that Laughing Kookaburras could carry) and to check on the leg colour of Eastern Swamphens (now Purple Swamphen). A letter from 25<sup>th</sup> November 1934 ends with a 'PS' that three snakes were killed today, two at Cape Willoughby which could not be brought home 5 miles, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> weighed one pound 3oz and was 4ft 8inches. The same letter reports that a party from the SA Museum arrived on the "Eleopsis" on 1<sup>st</sup> December to collect insects at Flinders Chase. Sutton confirms in his reply that the expedition was for a week but that the group was the Entomological Society. Dr Morgan, JS's colleague from the SA Museum as well as a prominent member of the SAOA, died in October 1934 and Allen commiserated on his death. In reply JS noted that his death was a blow to the SAOA as he was its mainstay, but that he had been in bad health since March 1933 and almost confined to home.

In December JS encloses a draft of Allen's article for the next *SAOrn* and asks him to check it for any corrections or additions. Allen makes a few changes and adds Fairy Tern but otherwise is happy with the paper. He also comments on the weather being rough for December, adding that they want hot weather to complete their harvest, although the grubs and wind have taken most this year. By February Allen was asking about the January issue of the *SAOrn* and JS replies that on the final proof a scratch appeared on the Doctor's face so a new block had to be made, delaying it for a week, "but as you can guess "no one knows nothing about it"".

There is a gap in the correspondence between February 1935, when Allen sent a card letting JS know that he would be in town for a cousin's wedding and would drop in at the Museum, and April 1936 when the correspondence continues. We do not know if there are missing letters or whether there was a break in the correspondence for some reason. JS notes that there are records by Flinders of pelicans breeding on islands in American River, but that Sutton believes that this colony was wiped out in later years and asks for local knowledge about this. Allen replies that he has heard the same information that pelicans bred in Pelican Lagoon but does not have any first-hand knowledge of this area. A later letter from March 1937 indicates that he does not believe that pelicans still nest on islands in American River even though they are sometimes numerous there but he will make further enquiries.

Much of the correspondence over the next few months is about sourcing egg cabinets for Allen's egg collection. Sutton goes to some trouble to get quotes for him from several Adelaide firms, including visits to find out why quotes are not forthcoming. In a letter of August 1936 Allen thanks him for all his efforts but he has decided to give the work to a cousin who is out of work and will do it for less than 10 pounds.

While Lashmar was in Adelaide in October 1936 he met Mr McGilp who advised him to apply for a permit for his egg collection in case

there was a seizure of collections as happened in the eastern states. McGilp told him to inform JS that he was happy to recommend Allen for a permit. Consequently Allen had written to the Director of the Museum asking for a permit to collect for the SA Museum and to retain duplicates for reference purposes, pointing out that there are no other ornithological collectors on Kangaroo Island. Sutton's reply indicated that permits were issued by the Fisheries and Game Department and permission to collect and retain specimens rested with the Museum Board. He recommends Allen to apply to the Chief Inspector of the Department for a permit to collect eggs and bird specimens on KI for scientific work and to use JS as a referee. A March 1937 letter from Allen notes that he has had an encouraging letter from the Minister of Agriculture but does not have a permit yet. Despite JS's view that the new Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game is very strict on issuing permits, Allen lets him know in May 1937 that he has received his permit.

At this stage Allen is writing another article for the *SAOrn* on additional bird species identified and nesting in his local area for the 1936-37 nesting season. There is the usual to and fro about bird species identification and finally in a letter of July 1937 Allen notes with pride the arrival of the *SAOrn* and his surprise that "my article should take up so much room." The remainder of the correspondence details new bird sightings, the sending of insect and bird specimens to the Museum and an interesting note about Mr Condon. He saw in the paper that Mr Condon had gone with an expedition to the Simpson Desert to search for the remains of Leichhardt's expedition. JS reported to Allen's brother that a black bird had been seen at Hog Bay in a group of Silver Gulls and in a later letter notes that Ces Rix was the observer. Rix thought the bird was most likely to be a Sooty Tern as it was smaller than a Crested Tern. Allen promises to check it out and talk to the locals as he goes for rifle practice there every Saturday. By June he had visited Hog Bay several times but there was no sign of the black bird. Ces Rix also saw a Flame Robin on the Island but, as the species had not been recorded

there before and it was only a sight record, JS was not inclined to accept it.

The correspondence between JS and Allen Lashmar in the possession of the SAOA ceases with a carbon copy of a letter from JS written on 10 November 1937. We know that this was not the last letter, as there is a photocopy of another letter from JS to Allen in the bird diary referred to above. This letter is dated 15<sup>th</sup> June 1938 (and written at 5.50pm!) and refers to a bird collected by Allen on 12<sup>th</sup> June that was identified as a Flame Robin – the first confirmed record from Kangaroo Island. JS asks Allen to investigate the size of the flock, to note the plumage of the other birds and to write it up for the *Ornithologist*. Allen did write this up in his article detailing new species confirmed from 1938. John Sutton died on 22 November 1938, having continued his daily visits to the Museum until the month before his death.

There is one other letter from Allen Lashmar in the SAOA Correspondence in the Folder for 1961-65. In this letter Allen asks the then Secretary, R.F. (Bob) Brown about bird banding and how he might get started. We know from events that he certainly got started and the next instalment will provide details of his bird banding activities amongst other things.

**Penny Paton**