

SAOA Historical Series No 36

Erhard Franz Boehm (1911-1994) 'An extraordinary amateur ornithologist'

Part 9

Having dealt with most birds bar waterbirds in the previous parts, we are left with a group of species to cover in Part 9. This eclectic group includes the sittella, treecreepers, pardalotes, butcherbirds, magpies, currawong, corvids, magpie-lark, chough, apostlebird, silvereye, blackbird, starling, mistletoebird, finches and sparrow.

Boehm (1928) reported that small flocks of Black-capped Sittellas (now **Varied Sittella**) were seen and that they bred on the Mount Mary Plains, with Boehm (1957) clarifying that most large patches of scrub contained pairs and small flocks. Moreover in autumn and winter, they sometimes gather in larger flocks of up to 20 individuals. The notebooks mention nest-building by four birds in black oak scrub near Bower in August 1955, while on 17th October 1940 a male was feeding a female which was brooding two eggs east of Sutherlands. Two females locked in combat lying under a mallee in July 1942 were captured by dropping a hat over them.

The **Brown Treecreeper** was described by Boehm (1928) as common in big timber. By 1957 he noted that, despite much cutting of tall timber, this species was still widespread and fairly common. Moreover they nested in hollow fence posts when suitable hollow trees were not available, lining them with rabbit's fur and wool. However Boehm (1982), in describing a banding study on this species, noted a decline in their distribution and abundance, with birds only occurring in remnant patches with tall old trees. He also observed that the population declined considerably in areas where fallen timber was removed for firewood in the 1950s and 1960s. The banding of 153 Brown Treecreepers at two stations showed a preponderance of males to females (62% compared with 38%), some movement of treecreepers after the breeding season and marked population fluctuations at times. The oldest bird was a female which was retrapped after 11 years, with five individuals surviving over six years after banding.

Breeding appeared to be restricted to spring, with 2-3 eggs laid in hollows; for example, eggs were found near Sutherlands in early September 1946, large young were calling from a hollow west of Bower in late September 1946 and juveniles were seen near Bower in December 1953 and at Sutherlands in late October 1954. Boehm (1982) comments on their habit of taking refuge in hollows in trees, logs and even rabbit warrens when released after processing. I have seen them taking refuge in tree hollows

during inclement weather and also when under attack by other bird species, including Dusky Woodswallows (pers. obs). There are three skin specimens in the SA Museum, from Sutherlands in 1928 and 1930.

Erhard long suspected that the **White-browed Treecreeper** inhabited the black oak and false sandalwood scrubs, but it was not until September 1954 that he found two birds in black oak near Mount Mary (Boehm 1957). An adult was carrying food to a hollow 13 feet up in a large black oak from which several nestlings could be heard calling. Birds were seen on several other occasions near Mount Mary, until at least 1972. However by the 1980s searches in areas where White-browed had been seen breeding resulted in finding only Brown Treecreepers. Even as early as 2nd April 1956, a search in black oak and mallee east-north-east of Mount Mary turned up three pairs of Brown Treecreepers, although previously only White-browed had been seen there. Erhard believed that timber cutting may have resulted in habitat changes not acceptable to the latter species.

Both species of pardalote were recorded in Boehm (1928), in which he noted that the Red-tipped (now Striated) was more common than the Yellow-tailed (now Spotted). Boehm (1957) elaborates on this, saying that the Striated is also less subject to fluctuations in the size of populations, although one of the notebooks does say that numbers vary with seasons and years. **Striated Pardalotes** will breed in holes in trees, in the walls of stone buildings and, occasionally, in soil among the roots of trees. Also at times they will feed on the ground amongst leaf litter in company with the other species. The sighting of a flock of at least 30 birds in August 1973 led Erhard to believe that winter flocking may occur more often than he had suspected. Other records confirm this, with 20 caught in mistnets near Bower in September 1973. An earlier record was of nine birds near Sutherlands in June 1953. There are two skins and a clutch of eggs from Sutherlands in the Boehm Collection.

Boehm (1957) reports that the **Spotted Pardalote** was most common at the end of autumn, when he estimated that several thousand birds would be in the district, with their tinkling calls filling the air. Flocks of up to 30 birds were noted and, while the species bred in the area, they seemed to be less numerous in the spring. The species preferred the second-growth mallee. In June 1969 Erhard noted that Spotted Pardalotes were almost absent from the scrubs during autumn and early winter and he wondered if this was

due to the absence of honeydew on the foliage of mallees. They were in much increased numbers in regrowth mallee scrub after drought-breaking rains in February 1973. There was cushion scale on the leaves of most of the trees about Sutherlands-Bower in March 1973 and Erhard wondered if there was some connection. The white cushion seemed to be deposited by sugar lerp lice infesting the mallee foliage. In early 1976 again the species was fairly common in regrowth mallee and had been for a year or so.

The **Pied Butcherbird** was recorded along the River Murray, but the only butcherbird on the Mount Mary Plains was the **Grey Butcherbird**. Not recorded before 1928 (Boehm 1928), but was a year later (Boehm 1929). Considered uncommon (Boehm 1957), breeding pairs occurred in scattered localities, with individuals wandering considerably. However in later years Erhard considered that the species had declined markedly. The last breeding record in the notebooks is of a pair with three fledglings at White Dam CP on 5th October 1978.

Initially the **White-backed Magpie** was the common type, with **Black-backed Magpies** much rarer (Boehm 1929), but by the 1950s this had altered, with the black-backs increasing and spreading westwards towards the Mt Lofty Ranges (Boehm 1956b, 1957) and even as far as Kapunda (Boehm 1963). However the White-backed remained more common, with breeding densities from 2-3 pairs up to 8-10 pairs per square mile. Erhard believed that magpies had become much more common with European settlement (presumably due to vegetation clearance). Hybrid magpies were often observed and the more common mixed matings appeared to consist of a Black-backed male with a White-backed female. In 1964 a pair of apparent White-backed Magpies at Erdora farm produced two young, one a White-backed and the other a Black-backed.

Boehm (1957) noted that, during severe droughts, magpies flocked to germinating wheat crops to eat the sprouting grain, with as many as 250 birds seen in a 100-acre crop in 1929. They also congregated during caterpillar and grasshopper plagues; for example Erhard saw about 20 magpies feeding on Black-tipped Locusts and Lesser Plague Grasshoppers in pasture being cultivated at the end of March 1946. A resident of the Greenock district informed Boehm in 1933 that magpies feed on bees and young Goldfinches. A male caught a House Mouse (*Mus musculus*) in a hay paddock near Eudunda on 21/11/1936 and Erhard saw magpies carrying dead House Sparrows on several occasions. A notebook reports two magpies catching flying ants up to 50 feet from the ground near Sutherlands in April 1956.

Magpies usually laid eggs in September and October, but eggs were recorded as early as 6th August. In 1949 a juvenile out of the nest about 6 weeks was observed on the ground apparently "anting". A male bird was heard to mimic the calls of starlings and ringneck parrots at Erdora homestead in early March 1949. On very hot days birds gathered in sheds and other deep shade opportunities to

escape the heat of the open paddocks; when the shade temperature was 114⁰F, 25 magpies exited an old cellar.

According to Boehm's summary notebook, the accounts of early settlers described the **Black-winged (now Grey) Currawong** as sparsely spread over the Mount Mary Plains. Within Erhard's lifetime, the species was an irregular visitor to the western portion of the region. Erhard had not observed this species breeding in 1941, but later he believed that breeding occurred in the remote scrubs of the Hundred of Bower from the evidence of juveniles not long out of the nest. Birds were usually seen in pairs or family groups, rarely in loose gatherings of seven or eight birds. In April 1955 Erhard observed 12 birds in small groups or singly in the Hundred of Bower – the largest number seen in one day to that date. A solitary bird was seen about the Erdora gardens and green-feed plots daily for at least a fortnight in July 1966. Two or three were at Erdora in June 1979, but did not stay long at any time because of attacks by the resident magpies.

The corvids of the Mt Mary Plains caused Boehm considerable confusion due to the taxonomic uncertainty in his early days of observing, as well as the well-known difficulties of identification. Early on he seemed to call the common raven, *Corvus coronoides* (i.e. the **Australian Raven**) when in fact it was most likely the **Little Raven**. The specimens he collected are predominantly Little Ravens collected between 1939 and 1966, mainly from Sutherlands and the surrounding area. Only one *coronoides* skin is in the Boehm collection, from 1966 and two sets of eggs, both from August 1947.

A paper on the results of banding Little Ravens (Boehm 1977) described this species as the common species in the district, with flocks of up to 100 birds occasionally observed in the autumn (Boehm 1957). Erhard believed that the Little Raven had probably increased in numbers during the period of European settlement and by the 1970s was nesting in areas where the Little Crow bred 30-40 years before. He thought that their greater adaptability and aggression was the cause. Banding of 1131 Little Ravens showed that breeding pairs do not wander far beyond the Mount Mary Plains during their nomadic non-breeding period (Boehm 1977). Juveniles were more likely to disperse more widely, with five birds recovered more than 100 km from the banding location within 4-8 months of banding.

Erhard described and published an unusual flying display of what is presumably a Little Raven, although at the time he refers to it as the Australian Raven (Boehm 1964). On a fine, sunny winter morning in 1940 the bird was flying very high, possibly 1000 feet up, and calling in a manner resembling a baritone human voice, when it quickened its calling and rolled on to its back with wings and tail expanded. The bird then righted itself for normal flight and continued on its way. The writings of Ian Rowley do not mention such display flight for any of the Australian *Corvus*, but the European Raven, *Corvus corax*, is known to perform aerial displays of a similar nature. Erhard believed

his experience to be a unique one. Ravens eat fruit, caterpillars, grasshoppers, seeds and wild fruits, as well as carrion. After many years of experience on the land, Boehm thought that ravens rarely killed lambs and, when they did, the lamb was often a deserted weakling (Boehm 1957). His publications do not mention their attacks on ewes, but his notebooks report that on several occasions in the 1960s ravens pecked the eyes or eyelids of cast pregnant ewes, which subsequently had to be killed.

I am assuming that the birds recorded as **Little Crows** are in fact Little Crows, as Erhard seemed to be confident that the call and flight were very distinctive. One of the summary notebooks indicates that Little Crows were less often noted on the Mount Mary Plains from the 1960s onwards. For example four birds landed in the sugar gum at Erdora Farm in December 1972 and these were the first seen at the homestead for several years. The largest flock recorded in the notebooks was a flock of 30 over Eudunda in May 1949. Breeding continued on the Mount Mary Plains after 1960; a pair nested twice west of Bower in the spring of 1973. They used old raven nests and 5 eggs were in each clutch. Both nestings failed, despite the season having higher rainfall than usual. However soft-bodied insects such as caterpillars, were very scarce. It may have been this fact that caused the failure of the breeding efforts by the Little Crow and of many clutches of Little Ravens in that year. According to Boehm, very young nestlings of the genus *Corvus* require soft-bodied insects during the first 10 days of their lives. A sighting of two birds at White Dam Conservation Park on 10/6/79 was a new locality record for Erhard.

The **Magpie-lark** was said to be common along Salt Creek (Boehm 1928). He expands on this, mentioning that they appear occasionally at dams and sometimes breed if there are suitable trees nearby (Boehm 1957). They are usually about lagoons that fill after heavy rains and the biggest flocks seen prior to the mid-1950s were of 15 birds. There are few records in the notebooks – four were at the homestead in August 1953, a nest and one fledgling were in a mallee east of Sutherlands in November 1954, although there was no water in the nearby dry watercourse and a nest at the homestead of B.L.Doecke in 1956 was built of cattle dung.

Regarded as fairly common early on, the **White-winged Chough** was believed to have increased in numbers as a result of European settlement due to the provision of dams, which made mud readily available for nest-building (Boehm 1928, 1957). He believed that prior to this they would have used emu droppings in dry seasons, and more latterly fresh cattle dung was used instead. After the breeding season the local birds form flocks of from 30 to 60 birds and, occasionally, these flocks meet and exceptionally large gatherings take place (Boehm 1960c). The largest gathering seen by Erhard was 120 birds feeding on pasture beside stock road close to Government Dam, south-east of Sutherlands on 11th April 1960. Choughs were not liked by

farmers in the grain-growing days prior to the 1960s, as they were reputed to destroy germinating wheat and, consequently, many nests were destroyed (Boehm 1957).

Eggs were generally laid in September and October, with 3-5 eggs being the usual clutch. However one nest contained 7 eggs and was believed to be the result of two females laying in the same nest (Boehm 1957). In 1946 eggs were found from mid-August to mid-October, a nest with 4 eggs was found in January 1947 and a party of choughs were building a nest towards the end of March 1946, using mud from beside a leaking trough. Freshly-built nests of choughs are sometimes usurped by kestrels on the Mount Mary Plains, with the kestrels laying their eggs and raising young in these nests. Common Bronzewing will also at times use an old chough nest to raise their young. In August 1968 choughs fed on the bulbs of Thread Iris (*Gynandris setifolia* now *Moraea setifolia*), which they dug out of the soil. A clutch of eggs from 1944 and a skin from 1960, both from Sutherlands, are in the Boehm collection.

A summary notebook reveals that **Apostlebirds** were not usually recorded on the Mount Mary Plains. However three were seen along the stock road, south of Sutherlands on 4th September 1977, as they were moving westwards towards the foothills of the Mt Lofty Ranges. Nine in a flock were also observed 4 km east of Eudunda on 18th July 1988. A local resident told Erhard that he had put food out for the birds over a period of a year and that the Apostlebirds came to feed at his homestead.

Boehm (1928) regarded the **Silvereye** as very rare; a more considered opinion was that they were in pairs or small flocks at any time of the year, but were not known to breed (Boehm 1957). The largest flocks were of 20-30 individuals. Silvereyes feed on wild fruits and berries, with a particular fondness for those of ruby saltbush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*). In July 1978 they were particularly numerous in Eudunda township. There is one skin in the SA Museum from Sutherlands in June 1931.

Blackbirds were seen in Eudunda years before they were recorded at Erdora. Mr Spen Elliott informed Erhard that a male Blackbird was in gardens in Eudunda on 24th October 1960, which was the first evidence to his knowledge from the town. In 1965 a dead adult male was found in Eudunda and by this time there were more birds about and they were damaging strawberries. Another informant told Erhard in 1961 that Blackbirds had been established in the Greenock-Seppeltsfield area for a quarter of a century. They occur there in thickets and orange trees. On 25th January 1977, a very furtive Blackbird was seen among vines and shrubbery at Erdora, while the date of an earlier sighting there was not recorded.

On the other hand, **Common Starlings** were common and bred throughout the district by the late 1950s (Boehm 1957), although were not recorded in papers in *The Ornithologist* in the 1920s and early 1930s. I do not know if this was because they were not recorded then or whether Erhard did not list them because they were an introduced

species. The earliest documentation I can find is in the notebooks, where a mixed flock of starlings and Masked Woodswallows were feeding on the small plague locust (*Austroicetes cruciata*) south-east of Sutherlands during December 1939. Boehm also notes that they breed between September and November and the clutch size is 4-6 eggs. Notebook 3 reports two starlings sitting on a draught horse in a paddock near Sutherlands in November 1953 (subsequently written up in *Emu* in Boehm 1954b). This paper also reports that they often perch on sheep's backs. Notebook 4 records the use of fence posts as nesting places for starlings – the same posts were used in 1965 and 1966, including a 2nd brood in one post in 1966.

The **Mistletoebird** eluded Erhard for many years and it was not until June 1941 that an adult male flew low over him, allowing for a positive identification (Boehm 1957). He believed that they were nomadic on the Mount Mary Plains, with no breeding reported. They are often seen in pepper trees (*Schinus molle*) eating the pink berries. In fact a male collected on 4th September 1957 near Sutherlands had been eating these berries. The notebooks record the sighting of individual male, female and immature birds occasionally and often at homesteads, where pepper trees would have been planted. They were also recorded in mallee and black oak scrubs. They were more often seen than usual in the autumn of 1978 in the Sutherlands-Bower district.

There are few records in the notebooks of the **Zebra Finch**, which were irregularly reported on the Mount Mary Plains, usually in pairs and small flocks, but occasionally in flocks of up to 30-50 birds (Boehm 1957). Nests are placed in a variety of situations, including the parasitic *Cassytha* creeper, spiny *Acacia* bushes, hollow trees, fence posts and in building gutters. Nests are built of grass and red sand-spurrey (*Spergularia rubra*) stems and lined with wool and feathers. Boehm (1976) summarized banding and other data for the species. The appearance of Zebra Finches did not always coincide with wet years; for example in the exceptionally good years of 1973-74, there were few birds present. During severe droughts there may be few birds about. Nesting occurred from October to April and, in some years, their food included the seeds of exotic Cruciferae, especially smooth mustard (*Sisymbrium erysimoides*) and London rocket (*S. irio*).

Erhard believed that European settlement had benefited this species, with the clearing of scrub and the provision of surface water, leading to more frequent and larger irruptions of Zebra Finches from the drier inland regions. From 1963 to 1971 a total of 375 Zebra Finches were banded from the Mount Mary Plains and the township of Eudunda. The retrap data showed that some individuals remained in winter, apparently when conditions were suitable. Generally the birds were less common in winter and, in some years, almost absent.

The exotic **European Goldfinch** was considered rare and was not known to breed on the Mount Mary Plains (Boehm 1957). Single birds or pairs occasionally appeared eastwards

as far as Bower, but did not stay long in any one location. Several were seen near Eudunda and Peep Hill in the summer of 1929 and one was at Erdora on 13th April 1929. Goldfinches were particularly common about Eudunda in 1966 and 1967 and bred freely. At this time there were numerous blue star thistles (*Centaurea calcitrapa*) along roadsides in the district and goldfinches flocked to them for the seeds. Later when the roadsides were widened and cleared of the thistles, the number of goldfinches declined sharply. Earlier than this, in January 1954, a flock of 14 flew from blue star thistles on a roadside, one mile east of Eudunda. There is a single skin in the Boehm collection, collected east of Sutherlands on 20th April 1959.

Considered very rare by the young Boehm (1928), **Diamond Firetails** were in small numbers in the scrub adjacent to the eastern foothills of the Mt Lofty Range and along creeks and large tree-lined watercourses further east (Boehm 1957). They bred in a few locations and some nests were placed under those of Brown Falcons. Commercial bird-trappers operated at sheep troughs during the late 1950s and the numbers of firetails declined at this time. In 1977 when one was along the Salt Creek, 5 km south of Sutherlands, Erhard commented that Diamond Firetails seemed to be slowly recovering as the result of full protection from bird-catchers. On 27th May 1978, he recorded about 40 birds in small flocks in bullock bushes 2 km south-west of Qualco. Qualco is on the River Murray, south-east of Morgan, so not in the Mount Mary Plains area that is of particular interest in this series.

Boehm (1957) comments that **House Sparrows** have been in the district at least 60 years which puts them there in the late nineteenth century. He found them common and noted that they did breed to a limited extent in the scrub away from townships and homesteads. The foods he recorded for this species included the fruits of bladder saltbush (*Atriplex vesicaria*), the bulbs of thread iris (*Gynandris setifolia* now *Moraea setifolia*), which they dug out of the ground (to a depth of 3-4 cm) and seeds voided by cattle in their dung. A male was observed at Anock Farm in June 1946, apparently “anting” - it sat on the ground and sometimes lay on its side, its feathers fluffed out and one wing partly open. Several times it pecked at something on the ground and then pushed its bill into its mantle or beneath the wing. There was a nest of tiny black ants at the spot. Some calls of House Sparrows heard at Sutherlands resembled those of parrots of the genus *Neophema* and of woodswallows (*Artamus personatus* and *A. superciliosus*). A flock of 30 birds flew across the Burra-Morgan road from White Dam Conservation Park on 22nd January 1979, which was a new locality record for Erhard.

Penny Paton