

SAOA Historical Series No 53

John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes

by Penny Paton — Part Two

Following on from Part One, which set the scene for John Sutton's Outer Harbor notes, I intend now to pick out the highlights of his observations from July 1930 to his last visit on 13th April 1935 in succeeding parts. On July 12th 1930 Sutton saw a Giant Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*) about 100 yards north of the end of the Outer Harbor wharf, and then two others that were hooked on a fisherman's line. The fisherman was fishing for salmon trout when one bird seized the top bait and then another bird came in to try to take the bait and was hooked on a second one. The hook was successfully removed from the first bird, which flew away, but the hook in the second bird was snapped off and on its release Sutton thought the bird was dying, as it dropped to the wharf. However it did fly away, but one bird returned and continued to annoy the fishermen who began to throw stones at the bird. Apparently the first bird that Sutton saw had also been hooked earlier in the morning. Sutton met the angler again in the afternoon and was told that two birds had been caught again separately in the afternoon and that one had a broken wing, caused by a large stone (the size of a "cottage loaf") thrown by a boy angler. It seems unlikely that the wing was broken as the bird flew away up channel.

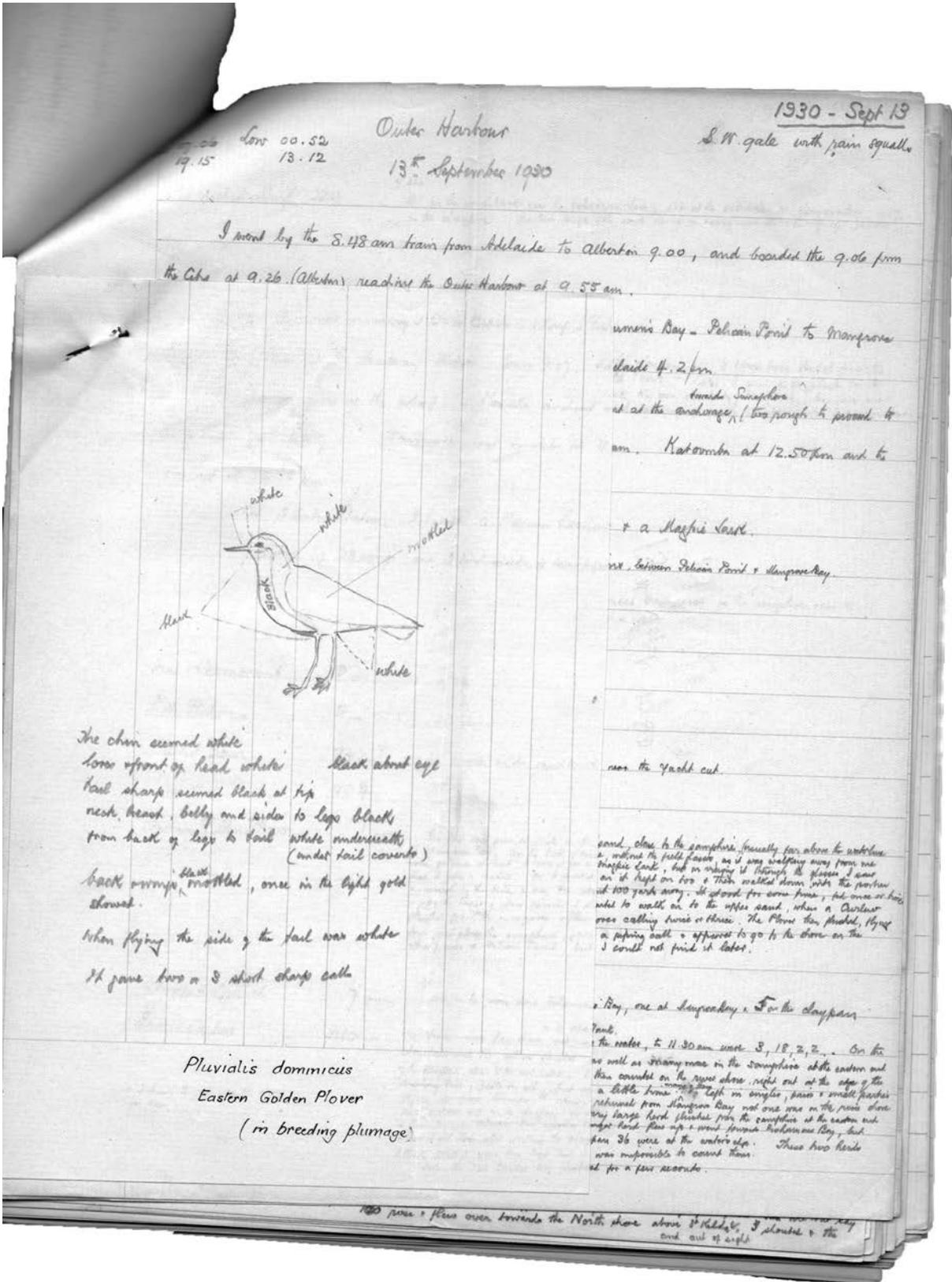
The Giant Petrel saga continued, with two birds being about the east revetment wall of the channel on 19th July. The tug man from the 'Cathay' told Sutton that the petrels appeared to eat anything, including a piece of rope. One of the professional fisherman alluded to a dead petrel on the wharf near the Yacht Squadron clubhouse but Sutton could not locate the body. A week later, there were apparently two birds about, one so far out that it could only just be recognised as a petrel and another reported by a man on the tug 'Woonda'. On 2nd August just one Giant Petrel was seen, bathing near the 'Hobson Bay' and later flying "just like an albatross but with a few wing beats at times". A note pinned to the 19th July observations reported that a man from the tug 'Woonda' told Sutton on the 26th July that after his departure on the 19th one of the Giant Petrels killed the other. Both birds were attracted to food scraps being thrown from the 'Cathay' when the larger bird caught the other by its wing, turned it over in

the water and jumped on its body. After half an hour of silent struggle the birds drifted to the stones of the east revetment and, on a large stone being thrown towards them, the larger bird flew away leaving the other bird dead. An officer from the 'Cathay' took the body. An angler, Mr Lawson, told Sutton on 9th August that, on his arrival at Outer Harbor just after 7am on 12th July, there were 5 petrels there, of which he hooked 4 during the course of that day.

Coincidentally a Giant Petrel was received at SAMA on 11th July so it seems that there was an unusual event occurring at this time – Sutton only recorded Giant Petrels on four visits to Outer Harbor, all in July and early August of 1930. There is a reference to this 'visitation' in the *South Australian Ornithologist (SAO)*, in which Sutton reported 14 Giant Petrels seen or captured on the coast of South Australia between the end of June and early August 1930, mainly from suburban beaches but including one bird from Goolwa (Monthly Proceedings 1930).

We now recognise two species of Giant Petrel, the Northern and the Southern, with the latter being more common in the Adelaide region. The specimen handed into SAMA had a green-tipped bill which identifies it as a Southern Giant Petrel (*M. giganteus*). However Sutton noted at Outer Harbor that two of the birds had a reddish tinge to the base of the under mandible. The Northern Giant Petrel (*M. halli*) has a reddish-tipped bill but no red at the base, so the identity of these birds is uncertain.

Small numbers of Banded Stilts were infrequently recorded by Sutton, with four birds on 12th July 1930 and one a week later. The four birds were seen on the river shore and on the claypan and others were seen feeding out in deeper water by swimming and wading. The largest numbers were 28 on 16th February 1935 and 15 on 26th May 1934. At about this time Herb Condon and Cecil Rix wrote a short paper on the birds of Buckland Park and they reported a flock of 2000 birds on Port Gawler beach sometime between 1932 and 1935 (Condon and Rix 1936). This location is only a few kilometres north of Outer Harbor.



Sutton's drawing of the Pacific Golden Plover, pinned to a typical page of his Outer Harbor notes

Again on 12th July 1930 Sutton penned a note to say that he had heard what he thought was a Tawny-crowned Honeyeater, although the habitat did not look like the areas that they normally frequented. This was confirmed on 26th July when he saw one bird atop a small shrub between the wharf and the Yacht Squadron Clubhouse. Two birds were seen on 9th August, one near the clubhouse and the other near Mangrove Bay on the Port River side and one bird on 23rd August between Mangrove Bay and Pelican Point. Single birds were seen on a few more occasions, namely 4/7/31, 14/11/31, 26/8/33, 14/7/34 and 4/8/34. Apart from the November bird, all others were recorded in July or August which suggests perhaps a movement of small numbers of Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters into the mangroves/samphire in winter. Condon and Rix (1936) did not record this species in the Buckland Park area.

While on the subject of honeyeaters, the common one at Outer Harbor was the Singing Honeyeater, which was seen on every visit, with numbers ranging from one to seventeen, with the average being about seven. Recorded as breeding by Condon and Rix (1936) at Buckland Park, it was of minor interest to Sutton, who made no comment on this species on most occasions.

Sutton's notes on 30th August 1930 mention a "waterside disturbance" at Port Adelaide, forcing him to leave the train at Alberton, and causing passengers to embark on the 'Warrawee' at Outer Harbor as they had missed her at the Port. A week later he observed both the 'Baradine' and the 'Westralia' at Outer Harbor, the latter being forced to dock there rather than at Port Adelaide, owing to the "waterside trouble".

On 4th October 1930 a Royal Commission was established in South Australia to enquire into and recommend a settlement of this long-running dispute (*The Advertiser*, 6/10/30). This was despite *The Argus* of 10th September 1930 suggesting that the long-running dispute was nearing an end with unionists returning to work. The genesis was the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s culminating in a National Strike of the Waterside Workers' Federation in September 1928. A new award handed down that month was not acceptable to the Union and, in times of high unemployment, non-unionists took work on the docks leading to violence and scuffles between the two groups. There were at least 4000 union workers and by 1930 about 400 non-unionists, many of whom were recently-arrived migrants from Europe. There were a number of riots and confrontations from September 1928, with the police attempting to control the crowds. I cannot locate any information on the outcome

of the Royal Commission of 1930. It seems somewhat incongruous to imagine John Sutton quietly going about his bird watching amidst the turmoil on the nearby docks.

A 'new' bird was sighted on 13th September 1930, namely a single Pacific Golden Plover (called Eastern Golden Plover at that time) on the sand at Mangrove Bay. Sutton drew a pencil sketch of the bird which was in breeding plumage, describing the colours of various parts. Curiously there was then a hiatus of four months during which no plovers were seen and then up to 34 were recorded from late January to late April 1931. Over the next four spring/summers, one to 39 birds were seen between late September/October till early to late April. The species was completely absent during late autumn/winter, suggesting that all birds had migrated to the Northern Hemisphere.

On 31st January and 7th February 1931 Sutton diverged from his normal routine and left Outer Harbor a couple of hours later than usual, despite arriving at the normal time; then for the next three months he stayed out there until about 7pm. There is no explanation for this change, but possibly he was excited by the waders he was seeing and wanted to prolong his visits to better coincide with the high tides and to take advantage of the increased day length. As the days became shorter he reverted to his more usual departure time of about 3pm.

September 20th 1930 was something of a red-letter day for Sutton as he saw 900 Eastern Curlew, by far the largest number that he recorded in his five years at Outer Harbor. His first sighting on that day was of 217 birds near the wharf, with all birds flying up at the salute given for the Governor, who was visiting the 'Java'. More curlews were seen on the river bank, bringing the total to 900. Eastern Curlews were seen on nearly all visits made by Sutton, with numbers dropping back in the autumn/winter when most birds migrated to the Northern Hemisphere. During the spring/summer months he more typically reported up to 500 curlews, although numbers were starting to decline in the summers of 1934 and 1935, with 400 being the maximum in those two years. Condon and Rix (1936) reported Eastern Curlews from the Buckland Park area, "Always to be seen from September to April on the seashore, often near the mangroves". They do not give any numbers so we cannot speculate on whether they were seeing the same birds recorded by Sutton, but it is interesting that they did not record birds through the winter as Sutton did.

Four days after the red-letter day, Dr Morgan accompanied Sutton to Outer Harbor, but no reason was given for his presence. Dr Morgan was Honorary Curator

at SAMA, with John Sutton in a supporting role and they would have spent many hours together at the Museum, so it is not surprising that they would have enjoyed field trips in each other's company. Only 170 curlews were seen on this day, so if 'the Doctor' was hoping for the big flock he must have been disappointed. All in all it was a quiet day, although it did include the observation of a nest of White-fronted Chat in a samphire bush containing two young.

Part One mentioned that there is a summary book of all Sutton's Outer Harbor records, but this book does not include any breeding records, so these need to be picked up in the voluminous field notes which cover many hundreds of pages. I will endeavour to collate these into a table at the end of the series so there is a summary available.

On 4th October 1930 John described an unidentified wader that he called a 'dotterel', "more like a dbdotterel in size, with a white forehead & the whole of the front white except for a brownish mark on each shoulder (like a r.c. dotterel) ... usually it was alone and at a distance" [from the other 'dotterels' – both Red-capped or Double-banded Dotterels]. John says "I thought it was a dbdotterel but it may have been some other wader". I suspect that he saw either a Lesser or Greater Sand Plover, more probably the former as it is closer in size to Double-banded Plover that John was very familiar with. These species were under-recorded in the early days of ornithology, no doubt due to the poor quality of binoculars and the lack of 'wader' specialists at the time.

One week later Sutton had his first sighting of Curlew Sandpipers at Outer Harbor. Three birds were with 28 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers near the fishermens' huts; one bird was in partial breeding plumage while the other two were lighter in colour. After this Sutton recorded this species regularly but in relatively small numbers throughout the spring/summer period, but from May to August there were either no records or small numbers of birds. By far the largest number seen was 215 on 14th October 1933, with more typical summer numbers being less than one hundred and sometimes less than fifty.

An interesting non-ornithological observation was made on 8th November 1930 when a sea plane circled around and dived over the 'Canberra' (a war boat); later two sea planes went from Port Adelaide to Buckland Park and then turned back towards Outer Harbor before returning up river to Port Adelaide.

Sutton recorded Silver Gulls on every visit and often in large numbers (hundreds and sometimes over one

thousand); on 15th November 1930 he was told by a professional fisherman that some Silver Gulls were nesting on the stones at the north and the west revetment mounds. Silver Gulls still nest in numbers near Outer Harbor today.

Many thanks to Philippa Horton for making available Sutton's Outer Harbor notes and for editing Part Two in her usual professional manner. Part Three will continue to review John Sutton's notes from 1931 onwards.

References and Sources

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