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John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes

by Penny Paton — Part Seven

This will be the final instalment in John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes, which will finish the documentation of the bird species recorded and include a summary of the species he noted breeding.

Sutton recorded Silvereyes very infrequently and only in small numbers; the largest group was four birds on 6th February 1932, a few were seen in June and July 1933 and the last records were one bird on 28th April and two birds on 12th May 1934. This compares with the comment from Condon and Rix (1936) that Silvereyes were "Common in the teatree scrub" at Buckland Park. Outer Harbor did not support any teatree (*Melaleuca halmaturorum*) which may explain the dearth of records there. Sutton's 1932 Silvereyes were in mangroves near White Beach, two birds in July 1933 were near the cricket ground and they were heard in April 1933 near the sports ground.

Mistletoebirds were very rare, with only one record on 15th April 1933 of two male birds, flushed from nitre bush *Nitraria billardiarei* near the "first creek, on the left bank (the right as you walk up it from the river)"; the birds flew towards St Kilda. Paton (2015) in Part 2 described Sutton's sightings of the Tawny-crowned Honeyeater. The species was recorded in four years, 1930, 1931, 1932 and 1934, in ones and twos and all



Tawny-crowned Honeyeater

Photographed by Peter Mckenzie
at Monarto on 4/11/16

records, bar one in November, were from July and August. Paton (2015) suggested that there was perhaps a movement of Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters into the mangroves over winter, although they were not recorded by Condon and Rix (1936). Higgins *et al.* (2001) quoted Colin Ashton's reports of the species as being mainly seen in winter and spring in the Aldinga/Sellicks region, which is on the southern Adelaide Plains.

The common honeyeater for Sutton 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. However he did note that there was a young bird with an adult in nitre bush near 'first creek' and another young bird heard from the mangroves on 17th November 1934.

Sutton only recorded two other honeyeater species, the White-plumed and the New Holland. His first record of White-plumed

Honeyeaters was of 18 birds feeding quietly on something in the mangrove trees at the mouth of White Beach Bay on 6th April 1931. A few days later he found 21 birds in the mangroves in the same spot and made mention that the mangroves were flowering. On Anzac Day there were 31 recorded and, of these, 21 were near the mouth of White Beach in the mangroves. The other ten were near the northern wharf sheds feeding on the flowers of a plant with an indecipherable name. Two years later, on 15th April 1933 there were 52 birds in the mangroves at the mouth of White Beach and several of these Sutton thought were immature. On the same day three birds were between the wharf and the Yacht Clubhouse. Two weeks later there were 35 in the mangroves at the same place and again the mangroves were flowering. Three other birds were seen in the mangroves elsewhere. On 20th May there were 23 birds near the Harbor Trust wharf and the Yacht Clubhouse and, a week later, 19 were about the Yacht Clubhouse and environs and 75 were in the mangroves in the usual place, but the mangrove trees were not flowering. Sutton's last record of White-plumed Honeyeaters was of six birds in shrubs near the huts east of the Yacht Clubhouse on 3rd June 1933. Condon and Rix (1936) indicated that White-plumed Honeyeaters were numerous near the Gawler River [no doubt associated with the river red gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*] and that young were seen on 1st March 1936, confirming breeding there.

There was only one record of the New Holland Honeyeater made by Sutton — on 11th April 1931 a single bird flushed with 21 White-plumed Honeyeaters out of the mangroves near White Beach. Condon and Rix (1936) list this species with no further comment. In addition they recorded four other honeyeater species – Noisy and Yellow-throated Miners, Red Wattlebird and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater from Buckland Park. They state that the last named was common in the tea tree and a nest was found on 6th October 1935.

Sutton recorded Richard's Pipits on most trips over the five years, with numbers from one to eight, with three or four being the most common. Three out of four birds seen on 25th October 1930 near the Yacht Squadron Clubhouse were young birds and on 14th October he observed two birds acting as if they had a nest and later saw an adult with food in its bill near the 'Old Tank'. Then on 23rd September 1933 Sutton observed:

"The driver of the "quod" told me of a lark's nest near the Snake Park. It was found by one of the men engaged on the pine planting by the bird flushing. It then had 3 eggs, now the "quod" man said that there were 3 young. He said he would mark the spot so that I could easily find it on my return walk. He did that by placing a 3ft branch stick about 2 feet off, with a white ticket stuck at the top. As I approached the spot 2 Pipits flushed from about 50 feet off. I could only see 2 heads of fully feathered young, if there was a third chick it was under the other two."

It is likely that the "quod" was actually a "quad", a small railway car used to check the railway lines (Wikipedia) but I can find no other reference to a Snake Park at Outer Harbor in the 1930s. The upshot of the above story was that a week later, on 30th September, the pipits' nest was empty. Condon and Rix (1936) also recorded breeding of Richard's Pipit at Buckland Park.

At the time of Sutton's observations, corvid taxonomy was confused due to the similarity of all the species that occurred in South Australia. The ravens close to Adelaide were usually assigned to the Australian Raven, although we now know that they were more likely to have been the Little Raven. I have therefore assigned Sutton's and Condon and Rix's (1936) birds to the Little Raven. Up to 24 but more usually up to ten birds were seen on most visits by Sutton, often with no additional comments. Condon and Rix (1936) 'recorded' both a raven and a crow ("*Corvus ceciliae*", now a subspecies of

Corvus orru), with a note that they were told that the crows “do little damage in these parts” [presumably referring to the local corvids, the Little Ravens, and damage caused to agriculture]. They noted breeding for both these species, but it is likely to have been just the Little Raven. The crow that they recorded was more likely to have been the Little Crow *Corvus bennetti*. The Australian Magpie was reported by Sutton occasionally in numbers from one to four and in all seasons. Condon and Rix (1936) reported breeding of magpies at Buckland Park. They also observed that a few Grey Butcherbirds were always in the teatree there, but Sutton did not record this species.

There was only one record of woodswallows made by Sutton and, as the birds were flying very high, he was unsure whether they were the Masked or the White-browed Woodswallow. He saw and heard these birds on 20th September 1930, which fits in with the time of year when these two species move south over the Adelaide region on a regular migration path.

Sutton recorded only three species of introduced birds at Outer Harbor. The Eurasian Skylark was seen in ones, twos and threes occasionally, starting with a heard record on 29th April 1933 near the Yacht Clubhouse and later near the golf course. A single bird was seen or heard irregularly throughout the rest of 1933 and then up to three were about from April to December 1934. They were not

recorded again until the last visit, with two on 13th April 1935, one near the huts and the other near the golf course. Condon and Rix (1936) did not report skylarks but did note that another observer had seen Horsfield’s Bushlark at Buckland Park in the mid 1930s.

A single Common Myna was recorded by Sutton from May 1934 until 13th April 1935 (his last visit recorded in the notes in the possession of the SA Museum). On 19th May 1934 a goods driver told Sutton of a strange bird about in the previous week and Sutton saw a myna on 12th May but thought then that it might have been an albino starling. Afterwards he was confident that it was a Common Myna as he saw it sitting on top of Ferguson’s workshop roof (see Paton 2016) and later at the Sports Ground and the wharf. This appears to be the first report of a Common Myna in the wild in South Australia (Higgins *et al.* 2006) and was presumably a cage escapee.



**A Flat-tailed Whydah
Kruger National Park, South Africa**

The third species of introduced bird seen at Outer Harbor by Sutton was a species of whydah.

Whydahs, in the family Viduidae, are finch-like birds native to Africa and the males have long tails in breeding plumage (Wikipedia). On 11th November 1933 when Sutton was walking from the

Railway Station to the Sports Ground he heard a loud single note call from a pine and then saw a bird flying with what he first thought was string around its legs, but turned out to be a

bird with a long tail. He recognised it as a whydah and watched as it flew to another pine near the south end of the wharf. Here it was attacked by a small bird and flew to the next pine where it settled. An hour later there was no sign of the bird. Nowadays there are still a few whydahs kept by aviculturalists in Australia (Avicultural Society of NSW).

For the first couple of months of recording in 1930, Sutton noted birds seen from the train on the line from Port Adelaide through Ethelton and Osborne to Outer Harbor, with most records being of Silver Gulls. What surprises me is that he did not record any Common Starlings or House Sparrows either at Outer Harbor or along the railway line in these early months. Higgins *et al.* (2006) notes that Common Starlings had reached Mt Lofty by 1892 and by 1919 were plentiful on the Adelaide Plains. House Sparrows expanded quickly after releases, often following roads and railways, and were presumably common in the Adelaide region and other parts of southern South Australia by the end of the nineteenth century (Higgins *et al.* 2006). However, as noted in Higgins *et al.* (2006), Cleland considered that their numbers declined in the Adelaide region between the 1890s and the 1950s.

Sutton made references throughout the notes to breeding records and, although I have not read all the pages of notes which number in the thousands, I have extracted these as I have come across them. The following is a list of the species for which there was evidence of breeding at Outer Harbor from 1930 to 1935: Silver Gull (reported by Mr Justice), Pied Cormorant, Red-capped Plover, Willy Wagtail, White-fronted Chat, Richard's Pipit and Welcome Swallow. Singing Honeyeaters were also likely to have bred there, as Sutton reported young birds.

Out of interest I checked the index for the early *South Australian Ornithologist* for references to Outer Harbor and found few that added bird

species to Sutton's records. However one did catch my eye and that was a record by Frank Parsons of 'a small flock of the "Blue-winged Parrots" seen at Outer Harbour (sic)' on the 27th May 1920 (Anon 1920). Philippa Horton checked the collection in the SA Museum and there is a Blue-winged Parrot specimen collected by Frank Parsons on 26th May 1920 from Outer Harbor, confirming the identification of his sight record.

So we conclude this account of Sutton's almost weekly visits to Outer Harbor over five years. I am deeply indebted to Philippa Horton for her magnificent work in editing the seven parts and improving the accuracy and readability of my interpretation of these copious notes.

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