

SAOA Historical Series Number 7

Chris Cain

Continuing in the series of correspondents to John Sutton, Secretary of the SAOA from 1922 to 1938, this section will be about a packet of letters from father and son, Walter and Chris Cain. The correspondence on file actually begins with letters from the son, Chris Cain, aged 14 years and 8 months at the start of this letter-writing campaign. The letters by Chris are neatly written in school-boy cursive handwriting, and the enthusiasm with which young Cain has taken to his new birding interest is evident in the volume of correspondence to JS during this initial period, being six letters, one skinned bird, and several eggs over six months. As each letter contains comments about locations, birds seen, the weather and other points of interest, I have chosen to relate the contents of each letter in brief rather than summarising the lot. In addition, where Chris has mentioned the name or species of a bird, I have italicised it, and put in brackets the name of the bird as we call it today. The Editor's Notes will also be in italics and brackets.

Letter 1 – October, 1931

Master Chris Cain's letters have a return address of a PO Box in Port Augusta but JS has written the place names of Yadlamalka (*Editor's Note: SA Ornithologist, Vol.12, Pt.1, Jan 1 1933, pp.28-30 has an article by JS entitled "Nesting of the Gull-billed Tern (Gelochelidon nilotica)" wherein JS describes Yadlamalka Station as 50 miles N of Port Augusta – HSTD 32° 02', 137° 53'), Warrakimbo (HSTD 31° 57', 138° 05') and Wilchery (HSTD 32° 50', 136° 29') in the margin of this letter. Not knowing the locations at the time of this initial letter, perhaps JS wrote down these names to remind himself to ask the Cains where they were in relation to the property where the Cains resided. Chris mentions several times in his letters a place called Yudinapina (sic.)*

(Editor's note: Yudnapinna — HSTD 32° 07', 137° 09'1) and we can only surmise that this is where he lives as he never really alludes to the location of "home". I suspect, from the contents of this and other letters, that Chris' father, Walter, has already made an acquaintance with JS and the particulars of the family are already known. However, in this first letter, it is evident that Master Cain is formally introducing himself to JS and is considering joining the Ornithological Association. Chris mentions that he has sent JS two books of "Observations on Bird Life" in his district, one of which is embossed with a Scout emblem because he submitted it in a Scout Craft Exhibition where his book took 1st prize! Eager to ensure the seriousness of his intent to observe birds properly, he apologises for the delay in beginning his diaries later than usual (being the month of June) due to the fact that he didn't quite understand what had to be done! This suggests that the initiation of the Observations books was due to either a requirement for the aforementioned Scout Exhibition or to a project being undertaken by the Ornithological Association, itself. *(Editor's Note: In SAOA Correspondence, there is a handwritten letter to Dr Morgan from J.N. McGilp who says he has read school competition papers and his prize winners were: 1st to Joan Cleland, 2nd to Chris Cain, 3rd to Mary B. Jolley. This letter also mentions that Chris wants to join the SAOA).*

Chris mentions that he hopes to be able to attend a meeting of the SAOA in December when the family is next in Adelaide, presumably to visit family and/or friends for the Christmas holidays. JS has penned a note in the corner of this letter to say that he replied to this letter on the 15th of December. As this letter is dated October, it is unclear whether JS replied to Chris prior to the family's travelling to Adelaide but subsequent letters indicate that they did meet

during the Christmas holiday period. One of the more fascinating and revealing personality traits of young Cain can be found in the way he signs off his letters to JS, being formal, full of respect and eager to please. An example is the way that he ends this letter, "Hoping that my work finds your favour, I am, dear sir, yours Truly, Master Chris Cain".

Letter 2 – 9 Jan 1932

Chris states that they "arrived back home safely on Saturday night after a weary journey" and that he hoped JS had a good day. It would be interesting to know how they travelled back home, whether by train, horse and cart or car/truck as it seems that they saw JS before leaving and were able to take note of the birds seen along the way. However they travelled, Chris states that they observed some *Scarlet Crested grass parrots* (now known as Scarlet-chested Parrots) and he will forward on these observations as well as his monthly recordings. He also writes to say that he will be taking a trip to Salt Bush Swamp on Yudinapina for a weekend camp but we'll find out a bit more about this trip in Letter 3. On the current journey, Chris says, in a most adult-like manner, that there are "one or two points" he would like to make about the birds observed during this journey. "Between Carrieton and Quorn", he notes, "I think I would be safe in saying we saw 1500 *Cockatoo Parrots* (Cockatiel). I have never seen anything like those numbers there before." He also mentions identifying a *Masked Plover* and seems perplexed about sighting this Northern Australian bird in such a location but is adamant that it is a *Masked Plover* because it is "the same bird that Cayley illustrates". More sure of himself in his correspondence to JS this time, Chris signs off this letter "Wishing you the compliments of the season, I remain, Yours Truly".

Tantalisingly, listed as a post-script, Chris notes that the weather has been cool and he has the "light pink spots on the *Rare Grass Parrot*" under observation.

Letter 3 – no date

This next piece of correspondence is a short note that must have accompanied a skinned specimen sent in by Chris. The specimen in question is the aforementioned *Masked Plover* and Chris sounds like he has secured the evidence to prove his point. He writes, "this is the bird we think is the *Masked Plover*. The only bird anything like it in Cayley's book is the *Masked Plover*". He shows great belief in both Cayley's and his identification of the bird! Chris goes on to say that there were large flocks of them on the Swamps at Yudinapina and that his "Dad" believes the skin to be that of an immature bird as he (Dad) has seen skins with deeper colouring. It is this exchange that intimates that Walter Cain (Dad) was a knowledgeable birder, and had, at some time, access to skins of birds for identification purposes. Whether that was at the South Australian Museum on previous visits to Adelaide, or in the private collections of other individuals, is difficult to say. Young Cain gives a physical description of the enclosed skinned bird by saying "it's (sic.) eyes are an inky blue", then mentions that he and his father will be going up to Lake Salmon (*HSTD 31° 49', 137° 51'*) on Kallioota (sic.) (*Kallioota-HSTD 31° 50', 137° 54'*) run soon. He ends the letter with an apology from his father for the rough skinning of the bird and kindest regards from the same. This same note is signed-off "thanking you for past favours, I am, yours sincerely, Chris Cain".

Letter 4 – 25 Jan 1932

As evidenced from above, young Cain was not afraid to put pen to paper, especially during these summer months when it seems that he was able to take more time to properly observe the birds where he was staying. In this last January letter, Chris mentions that the weather is now hot and JS will soon receive a box with a badly "skun" bird but that it "won't make any difference for I only sent it down for identification

purposes". He sounds a bit defensive here and, perhaps, chagrined for not taking a bit more care with his skinning, but it is unclear whether this letter refers to the skin that accompanied the previous note or to a later skin.

Chris says, again, that they will be going up to Lake Salmon and that he has been collecting beetles for a Mr Lea (perhaps met on the occasion of the December meeting? I have been told by Penny Paton that Mr Lea was an entomologist at the SA Museum and that he had written a well-known series of articles on Food of Australian Birds published in *Emu* by Lea and Gray).

Chris adds another post-script thanking JS for the *Ornithology Magazine* he has received and promises to pay the balance of his subscription as soon as he can.

In signing off on this letter, he says, "with kindest regards to you and Dr Morgan", though no previous reference has been made to Dr Morgan and it remains unclear why he has included his mention at this particular time (*Editor's Note: Dr Morgan was the Ornithologist at the SA Museum*).

Letter 5 – 1 March 1932

Written from Myrtle Springs Station via Copley, it seems that Master Chris Cain has graduated to employment as he writes about his new position as storeman at the abovementioned station. Rather cheekily, he begins this letter to Sutton by saying, "I suppose you think that I have forgotten you" but then goes on to explain about his relocation.

Chris says he is enclosing notes about his observations of the *Scarlet Chested Parrot* and will later send along records. These observations have been written on a separate sheet of paper and read as follows:

Information on *Scarlet Chested Grass Parrots* which were taken along the East West line.

1st Clutch – October 9 1931

A nest of four young *Scarlet Chested Grass Parrots* were taken out of Goldea (sic.) (*Editor's Note: probably Ooldea*) in the Mallee by the Aborigines and brought into the station.

2nd Clutch – October 23 1931

A nest of two young *Scarlet Chested Grass Parrots* were taken at Fisher by the railwaymen. There was also a "haddled" (*Editor's Note: probably "addled"*) egg with the young.

Cain then mentions his egg collection that a Mr McGilp has recently seen on his (Mr McGilp's) way through. He mentions that McGilp has seen the *Hawk's* egg that Sutton and Cain had discussed during Cain's visit to the museum and Chris promises to send Sutton a list of the birds each month that he sees around Myrtle Springs station.

Apparently, Sutton had asked Cain who had sent Sutton the wings of a Dollar Bird and Cain replies in this letter that it was a Mr Macintosh who also showed Cain a photo of the bird and said he (Macintosh) was interested in birds (*Editor's Note: In SA Ornithologist, Vol 13, Pt 1., p. 9, Mr V MacIntosh is named as an overseer at Myrtle Springs Station*). Cain asks Sutton to suggest the names of any birds worth looking out for "up here".

Interestingly, on the back page of this letter of Chris', JS has written "Lake Weatherstone" (*HSTD 30° 16', 138° 07'*) and "spotted crane or crane" (difficult to decipher). On the front of the letter, JS has written at the top, in pencil, the date "7/3/32", perhaps an indicator of when JS replied to this letter of Chris Cain's.

Letter 6 – 24 March 1932

From the same location, Chris Cain says that he has received Sutton's letter and the receipt of payment from 10 June 1931 (presumably his membership subscription) for which he thanks Sutton. He encloses the notes on the *Scarlet Chested Grass Parrot* that he promised before but had not completed and

apologises for errors that he has made (these notes may, in fact, be the ones mentioned above but there is not a date on the notes, so difficult to say).

A-ha! A reference is made in this letter to the Lake Weatherstone that JS scribbled on the back of Chris' previous correspondence. JS must have asked Chris to tell him about it as Chris replies that "Lake Weatherstone is still a lake but has just dried up so they tell me. Last October the islands which are 3 were covered with eggs". The station people must have taken some of the eggs and/or chicks as Chris says that they had a *Sea Gull* (Silver Gull) and a *Tern* (*Caspian*) in the garden but the cats got them. The *Gull* and *Tern* were taken from Lake Weatherstone in November of the previous year.

Chris then asks JS if the *Spotted Crake* is rare, thus giving us the answer to the indecipherable bird that JS had scribbled on the back of Chris' previous correspondence. JS must have mentioned it to Chris as having been spotted up there by a Mr Murray as Chris' next comment to JS asks what became of Mr Murray's collection up n his (Murray's) death.

Cain then informs JS that he will be sending an observation list down at the end of the month and requests that the Ornithologist be sent to Myrtle Springs.

Chris also says that he is enclosing, with the letter, the wing of a bird that the cat made a meal of (cats being a major problem for the birds even then, it seems) but didn't know what the bird was. JS has written in pencil beside this paragraph that the wing belonged to a Banded Landrail.

Chris then inquires if Mr McGilp identified the species of the *Hawk's* egg and doesn't think it is a Kestrel's, though McGilp does.

Chris closes this letter by offering his condolences on Mr Lea's sudden death and will send his "Beatels (sic.), etc." down to Mr Sutton.

JS has written in pencil at the top of this letter, the date "April 4/10".

I will end this series of the Cain letters here as the next series of letters seems to be

written by Chris Cain's father, Walter, with return notes/letters from John Sutton to Walter.

The Editor for the Historical Series is Penny Paton and I wish to thank her for her wonderful work on this article.

Sandy Bradley

The layout of Historical Series No. 6 on N.H.Pearse made it hard to work out that Bill Matheson was the author – the editor apologises for this and thanks Bill for the excellent piece.