

Historical Series No 72. Edwin Ashby (1861-1941)

Quaker, Naturalist and Plant Enthusiast.

Part 1 by Penny Paton

Early Life

Many South Australians know the botanic gardens at Blackwood as 'Wittunga', but I wonder how many know that it was the gift of the Ashby family to the state? The patriarch of the family, Edwin Ashby, came out from England on a visit for his health in 1884-87 and then migrated with his elder sister in 1888. Edwin was born in Pleystowe (sometimes written Plaistow) near Capel in Surrey on 2nd November 1861, to James Ashby, tea merchant, and his wife, Eliza née Sterry. He was a delicate child and received little formal education, but was encouraged in his natural history pursuits by both his parents who were able field naturalists (Robertson 1979).

After working in the South East of the state at wattlebark growing, Edwin returned to Adelaide and joined his cousin's business. His cousin, Ernest Charles Saunders, was a Quaker and, by 1894, was listed as a sharebroker and mining agent in Adelaide. Ernest, who died aged 92 in 1946, his wife Emily Constance, and two of their children, Maurice and Una, are buried in the Quaker section of the West Terrace Cemetery. By 1896 the firm of Saunders and Ashby was operating as land agents and sharebrokers from the Royal Exchange Building in King William Street (www 1*). They were responsible for floating many mining companies and syndicates and between 1890 and 1910 Edwin Ashby was closely involved in the mining industry, as liquidator, chairman of directors and director of more than 40 companies (Horton *et al.* 2018).

Family

Edwin Ashby married Esther Maria Coleman (Essie) on 6th May 1890 in the Friends Meeting House at Mt Barker. Esther was the daughter of Arthur Coleman and Lucy née May, who were married on 8th December 1858, also at the Friends Meeting House at Mt Barker. Lucy's parents, Joseph and Hannah May, had emigrated from Hertfordshire in 1839 with their eleven children and Joseph's brother, establishing a farm at 'Fairfield', Mt Barker (www 2). Arthur died in 1867, two months before the birth of their fifth child, Esther. A few years later Lucy took the children back to England so they could be educated at a Friend's School there (*ibid.*). In 1880 she returned, aged 46, to live at her family's home, 'Fairfield', presumably with at least some of her children.



Photo 1 — Keith and Alison Ashby in vegetable garden, with orchard and eucalypt scrub behind, Wittunga ca 1904 (courtesy, State Library of South Australia B70984/7)

Edwin and Esther initially lived in North Adelaide, where their four children were born: Ivan Edwin (1893-1920), Arthur Keith (1896-1971), Gwenyth Sterry (1898-1900) and Alison Marjorie (1901-1987). Saunders and Ashby owned much of Eden Hills (immediately to the west of Blackwood) and developed the suburb, with Edwin building his home at Wittunga in 1902 on the corner of what are now Shepherds Hill Road and Sherbourne Road. The sandstone and brick house still stands near this corner, although it was extensively damaged in a bushfire in 1934 and then rebuilt. A formal English garden grew up around the house, while a large vegetable garden and orchard were planted out by 1904. Photo 1 shows the garden and orchard in their infancy.



Photo 2 — The Ashby Family at Wittunga, ca 1910
L-R Standing — Ivan, Edwin, Keith: seated
Essie, Alison, Essie's mother Lucy Coleman
(Courtesy, State Library of South Australia B78904/5)

Edwin and Esther's private life was not without tragedy; they lost their third child, Gwenyth, at the early age of 17 months and, in 1920, their eldest child Ivan died at the age of 27 years, after a long illness. He was diabetic from birth but, despite this, studied medicine and was described by his niece, Enid Robertson, as "a brilliant medico" (www 3).

Their youngest child, Alison, was a shy child afflicted with a stutter and educated mainly at home. She shared her father's passion for native plants and vowed at an early age to paint every Australian wildflower. She received some painting tuition from well-known botanical illustrator Rosa Fiveash and painted in watercolours and on china. Caring for her bedridden mother became her chief preoccupation until Essie's death in 1943, after which she collected cuttings and seeds of Australian plants for cultivation at Wittunga. She travelled extensively in her home state and in Western Australia, collecting plant specimens for the herbaria in Perth and Adelaide (Robertson 2007).

Alison owned the north-western part of the Wittunga Farm and in 1957 donated her section, known as

Watiparinga, to the National Trust of South Australia, with two stipulations: that it was never to be built on and that the capital for the endowment she made for its maintenance was to be preserved. The 32 ha property had been extensively cleared and farmed, but Alison's vision was that the area should be planted with Australian natives. Later work, spearheaded by her niece, Enid Robertson, led to Watiparinga's restoration as an exemplar of grey box woodland, now a nationally threatened ecological community. Alison's 1500 paintings of native plants are housed in the Herbarium of South Australia and 240 of them have been turned into postcards that display her skill as a botanical artist. In later life Alison moved to Victor Harbor where she delighted in walking and planting native plants on her nephew's property, Mt Alma, at Inman Valley. She was laid to rest in a simple Quaker ceremony at the Inman Valley cemetery in 1987 (Robertson 2007).

Esther's mother, Lucy Coleman, lived at Wittunga for the last 20 years of her life: she died in February 1926, aged 94 years.

Photo 2 depicts the extended family at Wittunga. Edwin and his wife Essie lived at Wittunga until their deaths in 1941 and 1943 respectively.

Wittunga History

Subdivision of the Blackwood, Eden Hills and Belair area occurred before 1881, when a syndicate invested in land there along the proposed route of the railway (www 4). Some land clearance occurred in the 1870s for farming and then, in the 1880s and 1890s, the railway line and tunnels were constructed through what is now Watiparinga Reserve. The workers and their bullock teams traversed Watiparinga and adjacent land to move between the Belair Hotel and their work sites via rough tracks, some of which are still in use today as fire and access tracks (*ibid.*). The syndicate attempted further subdivision along the railway route but economic depression halted their plans. Ashby and Saunders purchased some of the land prior to 1902, with further purchases in 1911, by which time subdivision was more attractive, as the Eden Hills Railway Station was opened in April 1912.

I have been unable to find out exactly how much land was purchased by Edwin Ashby for Wittunga Farm, but it must have been at least 47 ha, as Watiparing is 32 ha and the Wittunga Botanic Gardens to the south-east, but not adjoining, is 15 ha. In addition some of the land was subdivided in the 1960s. Also in the 1930s an additional block was added to the Wittunga Farm; this 26 ha block immediately west of Watiparinga Reserve is now known as Ashby Reserve and comprises Sections 2202 and 2203, Hundred of Adelaide (www 4). So by the 1930s the Ashby family owned and managed at least 73 ha of land. At the time of purchase, some of this land was cleared, while other parts were clothed in native vegetation.

A commercial apple and pear orchard occupied part of Wittunga Farm while cattle, sheep and pigs were also farmed (www 5). The portions of the estate that became Watiparinga and Ashby Reserve were used for livestock grazing, so these areas were partially cleared, fertilised with superphosphate and sown to pasture (www 6).

Edwin Ashby the Ornithologist

Ashby gave up his position in the business, Saunders and Ashby, in 1914 at the comparatively young age of 53, but continued to operate a business from home. He became quite a wealthy man and this enabled him to travel widely and to pursue his many natural history interests, which included birds, plants, lepidoptera (moths and butterflies) and chitons, a type of mollusc.

A founding member of the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) and the AOU (Australasian Ornithologists' Union), the early name of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU), Ashby also served both organisations in executive positions and published widely in their journals. He was Vice-President of the SAOA for five annual terms between 1902 and 1933 and became President in 1903-04, 1912-13, 1920-21 and 1927-28. Ashby was auditor for the AOU from 1901-05, a council member of the RAOU from 1916-1923, Vice-President in 1922-23 and 1924-25, and President from 1925 for two years (Blaylock 2000). He was also an active member and President (1898-1900) of the Field Naturalists' Section of the Royal Society of South Australia and a member for many years of its Native Fauna and Flora Protection Committee.

Ashby published over 80 scientific papers on ornithology and collected bird skins and the occasional egg clutch and nests, but was not a serious egg collector. His passion for ornithology started at an early age, as evidenced by his trips to various parts of Australia in 1884-1887 when he was

just 'visiting' Australia. For example, as a 24-year old, Ashby collected two specimens of the Orange-bellied Parrot from Grange in November 1886, and saw "numbers" of them feeding in the flat behind the sandhills there (Ashby 1927a). Also in 1886 he travelled widely through Victoria and went to Tasmania, just the first of a many trips to the Apple Isle (Ashby 1917a, 1917b, 1920a, 1925, 1927a). He was also exploring South Australia, as evidenced by a comment in a paper written later in life, which also shows his attention to detail and his scientific bent, even in his twenties (Ashby 1926a):

"On the 9th September, 1886, the late James G. McDougall and the writer were collecting in the wild country near Cape Spencer, at a spot called Sandy Point, the south-western extremity of Yorke Peninsula, South Australia; here we found a Crow-Shrike's nest with one egg (which is described later in this paper) and made a skin of the bird. In December of the same year the writer met Mr. McDougall by appointment at the Public Library, Adelaide, bringing the skin of the *Strepera* with him. Together we compared it with Gould's figures and identified it with Gould's figure and description of *S. arguta*, the Hill Crow-Shrike of Tasmania."

Of course this bird we now know as the Brown Currawong *Strepera versicolor intermedia*, a subspecies of the Grey Currawong that occurs in the Gawler Ranges and Yellabinnna and on Yorke and Eyre Peninsulas.

Some of Ashby's interstate trips were made in concert with the annual RAOU Congress and Campout, which states took in turns to host. This was so of Ashby's 1920 visit to Western Australia (WA), when the first Congress and Campout took place there, due to the recent completion of the Transcontinental Railway. However it was not his first visit to the West; in 1888, the year he moved to Australia permanently, Ashby was at Broomehill (then called Etipup) in the southwest of WA. In a discussion of the then vexed taxonomy of the Yellow-throated Miner complex (including Dusky and Black-eared Miners), Ashby (1922) mentioned that he saw an acacia species (*Acacia acuminata*, Jamwood) there, this being favoured habitat for Dusky Miners. Then in August 1901 he travelled widely through WA, spending time in Perth and Moora and on Dirk Hartog Island, which lies off the coast between Geraldton and Carnarvon and would have been quite a remote spot in 1901 (Ashby 1901, 1922, 1929a).

Following the RAOU congress in 1920, Ashby and fellow South Australian, J. W. Mellor (the subject of SAOA Historical Series Nos 64-66, Paton 2018,

a,b,c), travelled to Moora, Dongara, Watheroo and Geraldton, observing and collecting birds in October 1920, at times in company with Messrs. Bullock and Orton (Ashby 1921). His last trip to WA took place in October 1927, when he attended the 26th RAOU Congress in Perth, at which as retiring President he delivered an address on the educational value of the study of ornithology (Ashby 1928a). His wife and his daughter, Alison, accompanied him on this occasion. Following the Congress some members attended the campout at Nornalup, in the Great Southern region of WA, between Walpole and Denmark. Ashby and Le Souef (1928) published a paper on the avifauna observed at the Nornalup campout, which was noteworthy for the paucity of bird species and comparative paucity of specimens encountered by the group of enthusiasts. Ashby did use his time to great effect in his pursuit of chitons, spending two days in a sheltered bay near Nornalup Inlet, where he gathered what was “probably the best collection of chitons” that had been made in the State to that date (Pollard 1928).

Following the camp at Nornalup Ashby and fellow RAOU member, Dr Chenery from New South Wales, caught the train from Perth to Geraldton. Ashby was such an avid collector that he gave Chenery some heart-stopping moments by leaving the train at stops and only just getting back on board before being left behind (Horton *et al.* 2018). They spent time at Geraldton and on Dirk Hartog Island, where Ashby left Chenery (Ashby 1929a, Ashby 1930). While on Dirk Hartog Island, Ashby indulged his other passion by making a collection of chitons (Ashby 1929b).

Ashby embarked on a long trip from the Peron Peninsula up the coast to Carnarvon and then southwards across the Gascoyne, Wooramel and Murchison Rivers to Mullewa, a distance of 675 miles (Ashby 1930). Despite their transport of a truck and the mail motor failing them badly, he documented the birds seen and collected on this hurried and uncomfortable trip. He collected a specimen of what he thought was a new species of cuckoo-shrike, which he named *Coracina gascoynensis* (Ashby 1929c). This bird is now regarded as a subspecies of the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae subpallida* (Horton *et al.* 2018). What was then thought to be a type specimen of this bird was destroyed like so many of Ashby’s skins in the fire of 1934 (Condon 1941).

Ashby’s exploration of New South Wales spanned several decades, with the earliest trip I can locate being in 1907 when he spent a short time at Cowra Creek in the Macannally (*sic*) Ranges, north-east of Cooma. These steep ranges are now in the

Macannally State Conservation Area. Ashby was particularly interested in noting the nests, scratchings and playgrounds of the Superb Lyrebird, although he did not locate any birds (Ashby 1907). Ashby was probably in the district due to his interest in mines, as the Cowra Creek area was noted for its gold mines and Ashby’s informant was a Mr Murray, a significant player in the mines there from the late 1890s (www 7). Ashby was desirous of introducing lyrebirds to suitable parts of South Australia, including the Adelaide hills and Kangaroo Island, but nothing came of this.

A weekend in the Blue Mountains in June 1915 gave Ashby the opportunity for some birdwatching and collecting (Ashby 1915a). He noted the birds he saw but, despite sitting for half an hour by a Superb Lyrebird nest, this species eluded him again. In September 1923 Ashby was again in New South Wales, this time at Point Clare on the western side of Brisbane Water near Gosford and further north up the coast at Port Stephens (Ashby 1924). His descriptions of the environment and birds are quite lyrical and this paper demonstrates his acuity at aligning bird species with their preferred habitats. From the rented accommodation at Port Stephens overlooking the harbour, Ashby explored the almost unspoilt bushland, delighting as much in the flora as the birds. On 20th October 1926 Ashby made the most of a brief visit of just 30 minutes to the bush in the National Park (presumably Royal National Park) at Port Hacking, south of Sydney. In the resulting short note he described the bower of a Satin Bowerbird, the nest of a Rock Warbler, the elusive Superb Lyrebird and several Striated Herons feeding in the mud and observed from a boat (Ashby 1927b).

In August 1928 Ashby, his wife and daughter Alison drove from Adelaide to Wentworth, via Eudunda, Morgan, Renmark and Mildura, with the return trip via Renmark, Loxton, Waikerie, Swan Reach and Truro (Ashby 1929d). Unlike some of his articles, this one describes many of the bird species recorded at stops along the way and also lists the specimens he collected.

Edwin Ashby part 2 will be published in the Spring edition of The Birder.

*The bracketed www 1, www 2 etc. refer to web references, which will appear in full at the end of the Ashby series.