

SAOA Historical Series No. 8

Walter Cain

In Series Number 7, we were introduced to Master Chris Cain through his letters of correspondence to John Sutton (JS), Secretary of the SAOA, (1922 – 1938). Chris Cain's letters began in October 1931. This next series of letters dates from April 1932 and is from the father of Chris Cain, Mr Walter Cain, who, from the tone of his letters, appears to have met John Sutton, Mr McGilp and Dr Morgan prior to 1931 and is on more familiar terms with them.

Though it is rather informal, I will address Walter Cain as Walter and Chris Cain as Chris throughout the essay to keep it easier to distinguish between the correspondences of the two Cains with John Sutton (whom I will address as JS to continue with the tradition of previous articles in the series).

Letter 7 – 27 April 1932

In this first letter, the postal address is that of a post office box in Port Augusta and subsequent letters of Walter Cain bear the same. Walter Cain, in his letters, appears very sure of himself and his birding knowledge, though, at this stage, I have no indication of either his livelihood or experience with the birding world. The tone of his letters suggests that of a farmer or station manager used to running things a certain way and at their command. In this letter, Walter writes to JS with details of a hawk that he has sent down under separate cover that he could not identify using *Cayley's*. He says: "Tell Mr McGilp we have not been able to secure a specimen of what (locals) call the *Ring neck pigeon Hawk* but one will be sent as soon as procurable (sic)". Walter sounds as though he is on a mission but it is unclear whether this mission is of his own creation or that of the Museum. His confidence in his bird knowledge is demonstrated in the next section of the letter, "The Hawk sent down is certainly not that species (*Ring neck pigeon Hawk*) although it has features in general that are similar but the *Ring neck* has a buff ring on the neck and is a smaller hawk than the one we would ask you to name for us (sent under separate cover). Ask Mr McGilp what was the issue of the hawk's (sic) egg he took down". Walter's manner in this letter tends towards brusqueness with no formality in his directives to JS but I suspect he tends just to be the kind of person who likes to get on with the business at hand. There is a "softer" side to him that comes through towards the end of this letter when he asks JS how Chris (Walter's son) "stands with you as regards his membership of the Ornithological Association". It seems that becoming a member of the SAOA during this period of time was highly commendable within the pastoral and birding communities and the membership was taken very seriously (*that's not to say we don't still take it seriously* — *author's note*). Walter suggests to JS that if Chris has not fully paid his subscription yet, then to let him (Walter) know as he may be able to help. Walter's closing address

to this letter is polite and consistent with the formality of the times, being, "Kind Regards, Yours Sincerely, Walter Cain" but the most fascinating and amusing part of the letter comes in a small post-script written in the lower right-hand corner of the page wherein Walter writes, "your skinning specification is too rigid for me so I am sending the bird without skinning".

JS has written in pencil at the top of the letter "April 29/2 May" which may indicate when he replied to this letter. On the back of the letter, JS has written in pencil "bird needed" and "undoubtedly *Kestrel's* eggs", perhaps in response to the letter. Further clarification is provided in a separate, hand-written note that is undated and unsigned but I have been assured that it is undoubtedly by JS as he was in the habit of copying his letters. The note answers some of the questions asked by Walter, thus,

"Your letter of 27th April arrived on Friday morning and the parcel arrived in the afternoon. The bird was in good condition and will make a fine specimen. It was an immature female Collared Sparrowhawk — an immature bird has the striping on the breast and abdomen in largish brown barrings whilst the mature bird has its front barred with dull white and reddish. It is not known how long a bird remains in the immature markings but probably more than one year. The change is noticed first on the flanks. The Sparrowhawk is a great killer of small birds and would have made great destruction in an aviary (*perhaps indicating how Walter came upon the bird* — *author's note*). Mr J Neil McGilp (*interesting how formally JS refers to Mr McGilp here*) was at our monthly meeting on Friday. I asked him about the eggs you referred to. He said they were undoubtedly Nankeen Kestrel's eggs and suggested that the best way to decide the point would be to secure a bird and send it down. Re Chris, the balance owing is 9/6. As I told him the amount on his enquiry a little while ago perhaps it would be as well for you not to do anything as he might think we were worrying about it, which is not the case."

JS then concludes this note by telling Walter that they are only too happy to answer questions or identify specimens and a receipt for the specimen would be sent in a day or so.

I like the diplomatic way in which JS handled the enquiry of Chris's subscription payment, the way he referred to Mr McGilp in a more formal fashion than Walter and still remained encouraging about continuing to send in specimens and questions.

Letter 8 – 29 April 1932

This letter is from Chris Cain with a return postal address of Willpoorina Station via Farina, SA (in pencil, JS has written in pencil on the top, right-hand corner of the letter, "Willpoorina Stn 10 miles N by W of Farina). I found it amongst Walter's letters and missed including it in Chris' essay, so I have included it here.

Chris thanks JS for sending him the July copy of the SA Ornithologist and another book — Australian Birds and Blossoms. He writes that he was "quite pleased to get the two books" and says that he thinks "Barrett's works are very good, what I see of them". Chris says that he sees that he has been nominated as a member of the SAOA but did not receive the April copy of the magazine and asks if JS has sent it. Chris then writes, "Getting to something more interesting" (*can't stop these birders talking business — author's note*) he has noted that a few more birds are nesting now and names them as the "Australian Dottrels (sic), Orange and White fronted Chats, Pipits, Hawks, & Galahs". He tells JS that he has taken a set of eggs from all of the birds mentioned above. Then, on a more personal note, he explains his new location to JS: "You will note my change of address. I was transferred from the Myrtle to here. This (is) also another of Sir Sidney Kidman's properties". With regard to bird habitat, he says, "Being lightly timbered country small birds constitute the greatest part of the bird life here." Chris mentions that he will be sending bird notes "without fail" and signs off in his usual formal manner, "With kindest regards to yourself and Dr Morgan". JS has written on the top of this letter in pencil the date "August 8" but there is no indication of why JS was delayed in his response to this letter.

Letter 9 – 16 May 1932

Walter Cain thanks John Sutton for receipt of the bird he sent down and for taking "very kindly interest" in his son. His tone in this letter is much softer and that of a man who has recognised that he doesn't have to bluff his way with JS. Walter includes the payment for the balance of the subscription that is owed by Chris and accepts the identification of his hawk as being the immature Collared Sparrowhawk. However, he notes, "these immature specimens make the field of bird study full of perplexity". Walter seems satisfied with Mr McGilp's ruling on the eggs that had been sent down for identification and says: "It certainly seems as if enthusiasm has run away with the local judgement". We now begin to see the wittier side of Walter's personality coming through in his letters. He ends the letter with a mention that he will be down in Adelaide at the end of the month and will look up JS at the Museum when he gets to town.

Letter 10 – 1 September 1932

There is considerable specific descriptive information in this letter of Walter's to JS so I have elected to reproduce a high proportion of the letter itself. Walter and his fellow birders are having difficulty in identifying different members of the Crow family.

"For identification purposes, we captured a bird on the nest. It has white eyes and plucking a feather from the breast the base half is white, (sic) the bird carries a bluish sheen and in repose the breast feathers project beyond the wings like a plume, (sic) I take this species to be the *Little Crow*. Young birds examined taken from the nest are a bird with white eyes and breast feathers all black (sic) this I presume is the *Raven*. Another examined has Hazel eyes and breast feathers all black".

Walter also mentions collecting a "fine set of five" eggs of the *Spotted Harrier* for Chris' collection and states that most of the eggs on the nest that he has found this season have been infertile, "for instance in the Crow referred to there were five eggs two in the incubation stages and three infertile". Apparently, it was an early nesting season for the parrots and Walter says "a batch of six young *Elegants* were observed at Dry South Creek last weekend just taken to flight". *Cockatiels* were nesting in great numbers and were being seen from "Nectar brook to Kallioota (*Kallioota as per Chris Cain series — editor's note, location should be Nectar Brook*)".

We also find out in this letter more personal information on Walter and Chris. Walter tells JS that Chris is sticking to his job on the station and likes the life. Walter also apologises for not getting a chance to see JS when last in town. But then, it's back to birding business. Walter tells JS that Chris has a set of "*white winged wrens*" for Mr McGilp but from Walter's additional description "(if I manage to blow them successfully) these tiny eggs are very fragile", it is apparent that Chris has eggs for Mr McGilp and not whole birds.

Finally, Walter asks JS if the *Spotted Harrier* is rare as he has seen "a few pairs about lately". JS has written in pencil at the top of this page "2/9/32".

Letter 11 – 4 Sept 1932 – from JS to Walter Cain

This is really the first formal piece of correspondence in this batch of letters that is from John Sutton to the correspondent. JS writes this letter from the address of No. 12 Fullarton Rd., Mitcham and apologises to Walter about not having much knowledge about nesting birds and the like. He says "I started late with birds and decided not to collect anything but to try and learn all I could about the birds themselves". However, he is able to give Walter some of the Crow information that he has requested by referring Walter to the minutes of previous meetings and, more specifically, some articles in Emu by various members (White, H.L., Emu, 1923 and Campbell, A. J., Emu, 1929). JS suggests to Walter that he observe the colour changes in the eyes of the nestlings from day to day whilst they are in the nest.

JS then addresses all of the other queries that Walter had in his previous correspondence. With regard to the infertile eggs issue, JS tells Walter that Dr Morgan considers the high rate of infertility in the eggs observed to be abnormal; the Spotted Harrier is rare in the South and is predominantly an interior bird; the Cockatiels have not been recorded down in Adelaide yet as it was rather early for them; and that he (JS) was sorry that he and

Walter couldn't catch up during Walter's recent visit to town. He admits that the Museum hours are rather awkward (2 to 4) (*a bit of an understatement — author's note*). JS then finishes his letter rather tongue-in-cheek by saying "Anything further you would like to know or to advise, don't forget to write!".

Letter 12 – 13th September 1932 – from Walter to JS

Walter writes to thank JS for his information on the Crows and appreciates the effort that JS made in order to get the information. Walter reckons "to give Cayley credit, he bridged the gulf (in identifying the 3 species in question) in a hop, skip & jump". Walter then tells JS that Chris had a fall at the station, tripping over the kitchen step, and has injured his foot. Though the injury was not serious, the doctor has him on a "stick" hobbling around and Walter expects that Chris will try to make his way to Adelaide to look up "Ornithological acquaintances" while waiting for his foot to heal. Walter then relates that a Mr Pearce went to Warri-Kimbo creek after a pair of *Black Falcon* that was sighted. He says they were lucky in "securing the nest with a fine set of 3 eggs". Then he mentions that they also got one egg of the "*Sy Tailed Kite*" and sighted a dozen pair of *Whistling Eagles*, two pair of *Tailed Kites* and 2 pairs of *Spotted Harriers* with one pair having "3 youngsters on the wing". In addition, they saw a fair number of *Elegants* with young on the wing, *Little Corellas* "in numbers but only one pair seen nesting", *Cockatiel* were in fair quantities and just getting started with regard to nesting. He took "2 nests of *Crimson chats* at Yadlamalka (as per location in Series 7)" and warns JS that Chris will have lots to tell him when he sees him.

Letter 13 – 23rd September 1932 – from JS to Walter

JS says in this letter that he is sorry to hear of Chris' accident, wishing him a speedy recovery, and asks if Chris has sent the bird notes that Chris promised to send earlier as they have not reached JS yet. He also tells Walter that he, Dr Morgan and Mr McGilp will be down the Coorong for 10 days or so around the 4th of October in case Chris tries to see them during that time. JS then goes on to tell Walter of the correct identification of the eggs that he had sighted at Warrakimbo Creek (as per location in Series 7), "the oologists, or egg collectors, tell me that the eggs of the *Square tailed Kite* mentioned by you as having been taken by Mr Pearce at Warrakimbo Creek would most probably be those of the Black or Fork-tailed Kite". He then asks Walter to write a description and take measurements of the eggs and send them down to the museum for comparison study.

Letter 14 – November 16th 1932 – from Walter to JS

In this letter, Walter gives JS additional identifying details of a pair of eggs that he collected on Yarley (Station?) approximately "13 miles N. – NW of Port Augusta". He admits that he is not sufficiently advanced in identification but, according to Cayley's, he is sure that the eggs are authentically "*Y.T. Miner's eggs*". JS has written in pencil in the margin opposite this section "They

were *Y.T. Miner's eggs*". Walter also tells JS that he has received a pair of "*Naretha blue bonnet*" eggs from Naretha WA but thinks they are abnormally large. JS has written in pencil opposite this section the following "*B. Zonarious* at Zanthus, *Psephotus varius* at Naretha in company with the Naretha Parrot Emu Vol 21 pp 170/189". Walter says that the person who sent him the eggs has not yet returned from WA so there was no accompanying data at that stage. He then tells JS that Chris' collection is growing and he is "desirous of nothing being included that is of a doubtful origin" indicating just how serious Walter is about his egg collecting.

Walter then tells JS that he was sorry that he and Mr McGilp were not in Adelaide when he and Chris visited but that they were very glad to be shown Mr McGilp's collection. Walter, cheeky so-and-so that he is, then upbraids JS and Dr Morgan as follows:

"As a wood-worker I feel I must pass a severe note of censure on both Dr Morgan and yourself for what you are — a pair of Dinkum Barbarians to house Mr McGilps (sic) fine collection in an Old Iron Bosc but possible (sic) the circumstances ... to that action was beyond your control".

As a post-script he tells JS that he has written to Mr McGilp for return of the set of 3 *Scarlet Breasts* that he had positively identified so that Walter can make them part of his collection. Then, perhaps to make-up for his earlier cheekiness, he signs off with "Very Kind Regards, From Yours Sincerely, Walter Cain".

Letter 15 – date illegible – from JS to Walter

Unfortunately, the ink on the first page of this letter is severely faded so no decipherable information can be made known. However, page 2 of this letter is decipherable and, in it, JS agrees with Walter only putting authenticated eggs into Chris' collection and JS laments the fact that the current practice of writing everything in centimetres or millimetres means nothing to him as he recalculates everything back to inches or feet so that he can grasp the meaning (*he has this Yank's sympathy, but you do adjust*). JS also raises the subject of the Cabinet with Walter,

"re Cabinet. As the Museum authorities are short of money (*P. Horton take note*), they have to purchase at the lowest quotations. The steel cabinets are cheaper than the pine ones and the drawers work much more easily and up to date have not jammed as the pine ones are constantly doing in the warmer weather. We have no say in the matter but have to take what is supplied".

Some things never change, eh?

JS concludes this letter by asking Walter for any *Scarlet breasted Parrot* occurrences to be recorded with dates and numbers seen and sent to him and apologises for being

away when he and Chris were visiting. Interestingly, the next item included in this batch of letters is a list dated 1921 with information from the H L White article in Emu about the Naretha birds. This information ties in with the earlier pencil written margin notes that JS made to Walter's Letter of 14 November (Letter 14).

Letter 16 – 27 Nov 1932 – from WC to JS

Walter writes to JS thanking and agreeing with his advice on the Naretha Bluebonnet and then mentions a colony of nesting Terns on the swamp (no identifying information on location of swamp) which JS has pencilled on the letter as being "Gull-billed Terns": Walter collected eggs from several nests prior to this letter and mentions that the swamp where the nests were located was very shallow with no more than 9 inches of water. However by the time of his writing this letter, the swamp had dried off completely and foxes had cleaned up "the nesting, eggs, chicks" and "they had eaten all the newly hatched and buried some in the mud". Walter writes that he has identified the birds as *Gull-billed Terns* and sends a skin to confirm identification. He mentions that the nests contained no more than 2 eggs with large colour variations (JS has written in pencil, "3 sometimes") and that the eyes and legs of the skinned bird were very black.

Letter 17 – 29 Nov 1932 – from JS to WC

JS's reply to Walter's Letter-16 is quite amusing. He begins his letter by saying, "Your letter of 27th instant together with the skin of a 'very dead' bird arrived to-day. The Director told me it scented everything in the Museum bag!"

He confirms Walter's identification of the bird as a Gull-billed Tern and tells him that it is not a very common species in South Australia and that he has seen them near Robe, only. He then spends the majority of the letter discussing the particulars of the species as noted by various authorities. JS then asks Walter that when he next writes to "mention the place and the number of birds seen there". I think we all tend to forget the important details in the excitement of discovery and I find that JS has a wonderful way of gently reminding Walter of the particulars necessary to properly record his finds. It is wonderful, too, to watch the warm rapport develop between these two gentlemen, especially over these last few letters.

Letter 18 – 3 Dec 1932 – from WC to JS

Walter writes, "Yes, it was the skin of a very dead bird and it might have been a lot deader had I not removed all the flesh I could get at". He then thanks JS for the identification notes on the Gull-billed Tern and says he is not impressed with the taxidermist used by Cayley's "I reckon the Taxidermist who stuffed Cayleys (sic) model used two hands – and a shovel." He then agrees with JS's assessment that seeing the nesting sites of these terns is a rare event and that he had seen few of these birds prior to that nesting. He has also included three pages of particulars with regard to the nesting site and observations made, though I am intrigued by the difference in style and

manner of the writing of these notes. These pages are written in pencil with a different slant and manner of writing. There is no identification on the notes with regard to the writer and I wonder whether Walter may have been accompanied when he made this collection.

Letter 19 – 14 Dec 1932 – from JS to WC

It appears that Walter is to have his first publication in the South Australian Ornithologist as JS tells him that the account of the nesting of the Gull-billed Tern "was very interesting and it will be printed in the next number . . . to be issued sometime in January". [Cain, W. 1933. Nesting of the Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*). *SAOrn* ,12:28-32.] He agrees with Walter that Cayley's book "or rather the figures" are not very helpful in identifying birds. JS then tells Walter that he has sent a book for Chris to Walter's postal address as it had a better chance of reaching Chris that way. JS tells Walter that the booklet, "No 3 of Barrett's Nature Lovers series" has poor woodcuts of the birds and then says that "6d most probably is the assessed value of the booklet". I am not sure if he is asking Walter to remunerate him for costs or if that is JS's opinion regarding the reason for the poor woodcuts of the birds. In any case, he concludes this letter as follows "Wishing you and Chris the compliments of the season and hoping that in the coming year the egg collection will be materially increased". I suppose that is the most favourable wish a birding enthusiast can pass on to another!

And that brings to an end this series of letters between Walter Cain and John Sutton. The letters between these two gentlemen continue for many more years and I have agreed to write them up for another day. In the meantime, there are several more correspondents with JS whose tales need to be told. I hope you have enjoyed reading the above in the format presented and, again, would like to thank Penny Paton for the opportunity to bring these letters to light, for her advice and editing skills.

Sandy Bradley