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John Sutton – a biography by Philippa Horton *Part Three*

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On a trip to Bool Lagoon, South-East SA, John Sutton and party stayed at “Peccaree” near Joanna, the property of Mr Arthur Lemon. Pictured here at “Peccaree” on 4 December 1930 are L. to R.: Dr A. M. Morgan, Mrs Gregory (not part of the birding party), F. E. Parsons and John Sutton. Photo courtesy John Ragless.

After becoming Honorary Secretary of the SAOA in 1922 and joining the SA Museum soon after, John Sutton must have become aware of the need for an up-to-date list of birds of SA. Ornithologists were relying on a list compiled in 1876 by Frederick George Waterhouse, then Curator of the SA Institute Museum, that included species from the Northern Territory, part of South Australia at the time (Waterhouse 1876). By the 1920s Waterhouse’s list was very outdated, missing such species as the Gibberbird, Grey-headed Honeyeater, Banded Whiteface, Rufous Songlark and several thornbills. John drew up a list of species reliably recorded in SA, based on museum specimens but also including sight records, and published it in the *SAO* (Sutton 1923). He acknowledged that it was unlikely to be complete but he was not prepared to include species for which there was inadequate

substantiating evidence. Following publication of the RAOU Checklist in 1926 John revised the nomenclature in his list, added recently confirmed species and published a second edition (Sutton 1927b). His tally of 356 (1st edn) and 369 (2nd edn) native species compares with 397 listed by Condon (1969) and 469 native species in the most recent census (Horton *et al.* 2013); predictably the biggest increase in species numbers has been among seabirds and shorebirds.

Undoubtedly John would have found his list useful in writing up birds recorded on field trips. As well as his own Saturday trips discussed in Part Two, John participated in several major field trips to various localities in SA. In January-February 1926 John camped on the north and south coasts of Kangaroo Island together with Norman Tindale and Herbert Hale from the

Museum. Their aim was to collect specimens for the Museum's zoological collections and to collect bones of the extinct Kangaroo Island Emu from the Kelly Hill caves, discovered the previous year. In 22 days spent on the island John observed 76 bird species plus two unidentified species, and Hale and Tindale secured 39 skins including a Regent Honeyeater (SAMA B6379), a species now extinct in SA. John wrote his observations in a notebook (now held in the SA Museum Bird Section) in which he also recorded weather observations, distances travelled, notes on geology, botany, etc. He also itemised goods bought at Mr Otim Singh's general store in Kingscote, including bread (3s for 6 loaves), eggs (1s 2d per dozen) and, appropriately, SAO biscuits (4s 6d for six packets). They occasionally supplemented their store provisions with local wildlife including fish for breakfast and a goanna curry for dinner. Apart from being driven to and from campsites the men did all their exploration on foot and there is evidence in the 60-year-old John's notebook narrative that he occasionally struggled to keep up with the other two much younger men (Tindale was 25 and Hale 30). One particular evening after walking about 10 miles in heavy going John was listening to the crystal radio set while Hale and Tindale went out after mammals and insects. John was so tired that he fell asleep sitting up, then feeling "absolutely dog tired" he retired to bed at 8.40 pm. John published a detailed account of the trip and bird observations in the *SAO* (Sutton 1926b).

Kangaroo Island was Sutton's only major field trip with the Museum, all others being with SAOA members. Notable among these were his two trips to Eyre Peninsula and the Gawler Ranges. The first was from 6 August to 1 September 1923 with Dr A. M. Morgan and J. Neil McGilp, and Jim the "slushie" – a term in use at the time for an assistant cook. They travelled in a Hudson motor car with McGilp and Morgan taking turns to do 50-mile stretches of driving. Again John published a detailed account of the journey and their bird observations in the *SAO* (Sutton 1924). They recorded 122 native species and Morgan collected 33 skins for the Museum. McGilp and Morgan also collected eggs, with 34 clutches from this trip eventually reaching the Museum when Morgan's egg collection (as part of the SAOA Collection) and McGilp's collection were donated to the Museum. Notable is the clutch of Western Grasswren eggs (*Amytornis textilis myall*) they collected near Wertigo Dam, inland from Whyalla; it was the first time the nest and eggs of this subspecies had been encountered and Morgan published a description of them in the *SAO* (Morgan 1924).

Despite their apparent success in finding breeding birds they felt that the 1923 trip was too early in the season, so in 1925 Sutton, Morgan and McGilp, together with F. E. Parsons (but no slushie), embarked on a second trip. This was to northeastern Eyre Peninsula and the Gawler Ranges from 6 September to 2 October 1925, with the hope that they would encounter the peak of the breeding season. As it happened they were a little late due to different seasonal conditions but they still managed to locate 227 occupied nests of 52 species – clearly they were exceptionally capable field ornithologists. They

travelled in a Hudson Six motor car, presumably the same one as in 1923; it is shown in the photo accompanying Part 2 of this biography. In his notebook John wrote copious notes on their travels, expenses, mileages, the weather and their observations of birds, other animals and plants. The party had time for a diversion in Iron Knob where they went to the local Institute one evening to see a performance by the O'Donnell and Ray Troupe (a search of the Trove website reveals that this was a pantomime and revue company). The following night John's notebook reveals that the entertainment was a Fan-tailed Cuckoo that was calling at 10.32, 10.39 and 11.00 pm, and then at 4 am and frequently until dawn. On their way home they stayed overnight in Port Augusta and went to the pictures to see "The Top of the World" (a Paramount movie from a novel by Ethel M. Dell; information from Trove). Once more John published in *SAO* the narrative of the journey and details of birds observed (Sutton 1926a). They recorded 105 native species, and Morgan and Parsons collected 89 skins that came to the Museum directly from Morgan and later from Parsons when his collection was purchased by the Museum. McGilp, Morgan and Parsons also collected 40 clutches of eggs that were eventually incorporated into the Museum collection. Years later the then Curator of Birds at the Museum, Herb Condon, described two new subspecies from specimens collected on this trip (Condon 1951): the northern Eyre Peninsula forms of the Chestnut-backed Quailthrush *Cinclosoma castanotum morgani* and the Rufous Fieldwren *Calamanthus fuliginosus [campestris] suttoni*. However neither subspecies is currently recognised.

John took part in two major field trips to the Murray Mallee, the first during 1-9 September 1928 with J. Neil McGilp, his brother Lachlan K. McGilp and Frank E. Parsons; Dr A. M. Morgan was to have accompanied them but had to pull out due to a "temporary indisposition". Their route took them to Karoonda and to Enan Bore 12 miles (19 km) to the south-east, then on to Taplan near the Victorian border, and finally via Loxton to Swan Reach. John's published account of the trip (Sutton 1929) provides information on the locations of remnant vegetation at that time and it appears from his descriptions that extensive areas of that part of the mallee had already been cleared. The party made their camps in uncleared bushland and some of the individual species counts were remarkable: 41 Striated Grasswrens, 66 Purple-gaped Honeyeaters, 46 Shy Heathwrens, 52 White-browed Babblers and 23 Southern Scrub Robins at Enan Bore, and 29 Pallid Cuckoos, 65 Brown Treecreepers, 122 Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters, 30 Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters, 60 Chestnut-crowned Babblers, 21 Black-faced Cuckooshrikes, and 42 Red-capped Robins around their camp near Taplan. Altogether they observed 84 species in mallee east of the River Murray and found 92 nests (or evidence of nesting) of 42 species. The McGilp brothers and Parsons all collected birds and 53 were prepared as skins; however only 26 of these are in the Museum as McGilp's skin collection was never acquired. A dozen clutches of eggs collected during this

trip eventually reached the Museum with the McGilp and Parsons egg collections.

The second Murray Mallee trip was during 15-27 September 1934 with Neil McGilp, Frank Parsons, Dr Arthur Chenery (SAOA member and medical practitioner from Victoria who had worked in rural SA and was a close friend of Dr Morgan's) and Herb Condon (at that time a Museum Cadet working partly in Ornithology). Much of this trip was centred around the SA-Victoria border near Pinnaroo and Panitya (Vic.), in the company of egg collector Royal (Roy) G. Ribbons who farmed a property seven miles (11 km) north of Panitya. Unusually John did not publish an account of the trip but his notebook provides copious information on the 71 species observed east of the River Murray, as well as the 120 nests (of 30 species) investigated, and 29 birds collected by Condon and Parsons for skinning. These skins are now in the Museum, together with six egg clutches taken on the trip. John included an index in his notebook, largely to localities and species and their behaviours. One index entry intriguingly says "Collision" and on looking at the relevant page we find that too much attention was being paid to a magpie's nest when "Mr McGilp's car ran into the back of Mr Parsons' car. The former was damaged, the glass in both lights was smashed and the front of the chassis driven inwards. After attention we were able to proceed...". Perhaps McGilp had slept as little as John the previous night; the notebook reveals that "Rain fell for about a minute very early in the morning. 3.15 am I heard a Spotted Nightjar call; 7 calls were given in all. 5.15 Spotted Nightjar – 2 calls. 5.20 I got up, sat by the fire which I made up. 5.32 Striated Grass Wren, Banded Plover, Red-tailed [Inland] Thornbill. 5.34 White-eared Honeyeater". Further observations followed until 6 am when the "general orchestra" ceased.

Sutton's primary role on these field trips was as a recorder of observations. He did not actively collect specimens, explaining to Walter Cain in a letter of 4 Sept 1932 (Bradley 2004a) that "I started late with birds and decided not to collect anything but to try and learn all I could about the birds themselves." Later he lamented to Cain that he started ornithology too late in life to become the avid egg collector he would have liked to be (letter 8 Jan. 1933; Bradley 2004b). He did however collect specimens opportunistically and the Museum database includes 43 skins, skeletons and egg clutches that he picked up around SA from 1920 to 1938. These included a Pallid Cuckoo with a broken wing that he found in his back yard on 3 Nov. 1928; he added a postscript to his notebook: "on dissection it was found to have been shot."

Given that John began his field trip experiences with the RAOU Congress campout in NSW in 1921 we might expect him to have attended most subsequent congresses and campouts, but this is not the case. He did attend the 21st Congress in Adelaide in October 1922 (RAOU 1923) but not the campout at Mount Remarkable in the southern Flinders Ranges. Thereafter he missed all the congresses held interstate until the event returned again to Adelaide for the 28th Congress in October 1929, at which he was elected minute secretary. The campout was held at Salt

Creek on the Coorong from 11 to 17 October and John was a participant, driven there by Dr Morgan. His next Congress was the 35th in October-November 1936, again in Adelaide (RAOU 1937), but he did not join the campout to northern Eyre Peninsula and the Gawler Ranges.

After the 1921 RAOU Congress John made only three more interstate trips, all by train to Sydney to visit his mother Hannah and brother Harvey and family; each time he stayed at Harvey's home "Lynton" in Rose Bay. The first was in March to April 1923 and the second in January to February 1929, and on both occasions he spent much time birdwatching with his friend Harry Wolstenholme of Wahroonga, north of Sydney, an RAOU member he had visited and birded with after the 1921 Congress. The two men published their observations on a colony of Bell Miners at Avoca, north of Sydney (Wolstenholme and Sutton 1923). During the second trip John twice made overnight visits to the Royal National Park south of Sydney, utilising an ornithologists' cabin there, in order to record overnight calls and the dawn chorus and to birdwatch in the park during the morning. Returning to Harvey's at 6 pm after the first nocturnal effort he remarked in his notebook: "thoroughly tired out, bed at 7.40 pm". On the journey home to Adelaide at the end of the first Sydney trip John stopped in Melbourne in order to spend a couple of days on Phillip Island. He travelled there with a small party of ornithologists that included Dr Casey A. Wood, an American ornithologist and ophthalmologist who visited Australia in 1923 in order to study the eyes of native birds. On the island they inspected a Short-tailed Shearwater rookery at Cape Woolamai and a Little Penguin rookery at Cat Bay.

John's third Sydney trip was most likely at short notice, his mother at the age of 93 being near the end of her life. John left Adelaide on 23 December 1930 and was still on the train on Christmas Eve when his mother died; he reached his family on Christmas Day and no doubt his arrival was a great boost for their spirits. Despite the sad circumstances he still entered bird observations in his notebook, recording for Rose Bay that day "willie wagtail, Indian dove, silver eye, pipit, superb blue wren". On 31 December he telephoned Wahroonga to inquire after his old friend Harry Wolstenholme, only to find that Harry had died in October. John did little birding for the remainder of his stay and he departed for Adelaide on 4 January 1931.

As well as birding on field trips and interstate travels John continued his home observations, keeping a daily record of weather conditions and birds observed in and around his family's Netherby garden. Many notebook references to fruit trees and an extensive vegetable garden indicate that it was a productive garden in which John spent many hours. One reference to "Jack" clipping a rose bush and finding a Blackbird's nest in it suggests that John did have some gardening help. He continued to publish his more significant home observations in the *SAO*, such as in Sutton (1928) in which he also made reference to the bird food-table in the family's garden. An astonishing number of nocturnal observations, mainly of owls, cuckoos and

Willie Wagtails, suggest that John was a light sleeper and probably got by with a few hours of sleep most nights. He gave precise times for many of these observations but some were vague, such as on 26 April 1928: "During the night I heard one scale call of a pallid cuckoo, but I may have dreamt it as I was writing up the cuckoo notes all yesterday afternoon." The notebooks also document the arrival of two previously more inland species in the Netherby area: Crested Pigeon and Galah. John first recorded the Crested Pigeon in 1934 but seven of his 11 observations were not until 1938. He seems to have first observed the Galah in 1926 (Sutton 1927a) then recorded them sporadically from 1928 to 1935. From 1936 to the end of July 1938 he recorded them frequently, with the largest flocks of up to 100 birds being observed in autumn and winter.

John also noted any interesting observations made by his wife Harriet and step-son Leonard Roake, such as the Fork-tailed Swifts that Harriet discovered flying overhead on 27 January 1932 as a cool change came in after a maximum of 108.4°F (42.4°C) at the end of a heatwave. An earlier heatwave from 15-21 January 1932 may have influenced the arrival of a Mountain [Bassian] Thrush in their orchard and vegetable garden on the 21st. John and Harriet continued to observe the thrush on most days until 20 February 1932 and John included it in notes for the *SAO* (Sutton 1932). This was probably the last time the species was observed in the Mitcham area until nearly 40 years later (Glover 1973). At the end of that same January John's notebook included bird observations he made at and near the Adelaide Oval, where he watched the Fourth Test (29/1-2/2/1932) of the summer cricket series Australia vs South Africa. No doubt birds were a lower priority than watching Don Bradman score 299 not out, his highest ever not out score in a test match. Nonetheless John's observations of a Crested Shrike-tit and a pair of Pacific Gulls near the Oval are of interest to us today.

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