

A Sketch of the Life of Samuel White—
Ornithologist, Soldier, Sailor, and Explorer.

[BY HIS SON, S. A. WHITE.]

V.—THE ORNITHOLOGIST.

Additional notes having come to hand I find that I have omitted one or two important facts. Soon after Samuel White's return with his brother, William, from the Murray River in 1865 he must have embarked on another expedition, this time taking a man servant, Cottrell by name, two horses, and a cart. On the latter was packed a light flat-bottom boat to enable the ornithologist to cross any estuaries or arms of the Gulfs. He seems to have shaped a course along the Gulf of St. Vincent, and passed round its head, then followed the coastline of Spencer's Gulf till a spot was reached some little distance north of Port Germein and south of Port Augusta. Here he undertook the hazardous course of crossing the Gulf, using a blanket as a makeshift sail for his little boat. Cottrell

remained with the horses and cart. All went well with Samuel while on the trip over. By sailing and pulling he reached the western coastline of Spencer's Gulf. Pulling his boat out of reach of the tide he formed his camp, and soon set out to explore for birds in a new country. The feelings and expectations of this early ornithologist can only be understood by those who have set foot in an unexplored country. There is no doubt many interesting specimens were collected, but his great find was a new blue wren (*Malurus callainus*, Gould), called by the describer in the vernacular "Turquoise Superb Warbler." I cannot do better than repeat what the great ornithologist, John Gould, tells us about this bird in his folio work supplement to "The Birds of Australia," Part IV., under the heading, *Malurus callainus*, Gould (Turquoise Superb Warbler) —"For the knowledge of the existence of this lovely species I am indebted to S. White, Esq., of the Reedbeds, Adelaide, who informs me that he was under the impression it was a new bird the moment he saw the first example that came under his notice. He was, therefore, induced to shoot and skin eight or ten others of both sexes, all of which, with the exception of two males, he had the misfortune to lose in crossing Spencer's Gulf. They were procured in the "Salt Bush Scrub" about 300 or 400 miles north-west of Adelaide. Upon measuring these Mr. White found that the extent of their wings from tip to tip varied from $5\frac{1}{2}$ to 6 inches, the specimen sent me being one of the smaller examples. Their habits were very similar to those of the other members of the genus, and were not characterized by any peculiarity. The males, as is usual when adorned with their nuptial dress, were very shy, and those secured by Mr. White were obtained by a kind of ruse (placing his hat on the ground and hiding himself in the bush until curiosity prompted the birds to examine the unusual object). That this gentleman may again visit the home of the species and obtain the female is my ardent wish; he should bear in mind that, the locality being maiden ground, in all probability other unknown species of birds will be found, the discovery of which will amply reward him for the trouble of research, and I have no doubt he will do so, for I have reason to believe that no one of my many correspondents in Australia is more keenly alive to the interests which attach to our favourite branch of science—ornithology."

So Gould touched lightly upon an accident which was nearly a tragedy, and the means of cutting off the life of one

of Australia's greatest ornithologists. I say lightly, but that may be due to my father, for more than likely he made but passing comments to his friend Gould of this accident, which was ever his wont when speaking of his many dangerous experiences.

So far as I know the incident alluded to happened in this way. Having dragged his boat down to the water he put his specimens, guns, and camp equipment on board, and, pushing off, set sail for the eastern side of the Gulf. He seldom spoke of this experience in after life, but those to whom he told the tale say the breeze freshened towards the afternoon, and a sudden squall struck the boat when a considerable distance off the eastern shore, the improvised sail did not clear when he let it go, and the boat capsized, all the heavy articles going to the bottom. Strange to say a small box which contained the two *Malurus* and three other skins floated close by, and it was secured. The ornithologist stuck to the boat for some time in the hope of righting her. He found this impossible, and the wind and the tide taking the boat, which was awash, further out, he divested himself of all clothing possible, secured the precious little box with the specimens, and taking one of the floor boards from the boat he made for the shore. A fearful battle for life took place, and after swimming and floating for many hours in the water Samuel White had just enough strength left to drag himself on to the dry sand where he lay unconscious for a long time. With the assistance and attention of his man he soon recovered and returned to his home at the Reedbeds by another route. The new *Malurus* was forwarded to John Gould in London. The chief object, I believe, of this trip was to discover how far north *Epthianura tricolor* and *E. aurifrons* could be found. An odd bird or two visited the Adelaide Plains in those days—always coming from and returning to the North—and this early ornithologist was anxious to discover their home and how far north and north-west their habitat extended.

In Part IV. of this series I stated that the Queensland trip took eight months, but from information now to hand I find Samuel White and his brother William were away from home the greater part of two years.

In April, 1869, Samuel White married, thus securing a loving companion who shared the hardships and pleasures of many an ornithological expedition by land and sea.

On the 14th of July, 1869, they both sailed for England in the "Fire Queen," and after a voyage of five months landed safely in the Old Country. Their sojourn in England proved a very happy one. A great deal of time was spent with John Gould, who gave a little dinner on one occasion in honour of the Australian ornithologist, and at this gathering many Old World bird men met my father. I have been told days and nights were spent discussing ornithological subjects, and a great and lasting friendship sprang up between the great author of "The Birds of Australia" and the greatest field ornithologist Australia has ever possessed. As a son I may be biased, but it has always been my contention that in spite of the great regard that John Gould had for my father the great author never made use of his opportunities to enlighten the scientific world with regard to the great work my father accomplished in ornithological field work. A few scant references were the extent of acknowledgement of only a few of the many new birds discovered by Samuel White.

