

# Obituary: John Eckert

11 February 1932 to 21 June 2008

Farmer, Naturalist, Ornithologist, Conservationist, Community Leader

## ANDREW BLACK AND PHILIPPA HORTON

The second child and oldest of three sons of Henry and Dorothy Eckert, farmers of Belvidere, Henry John was always known as John. He attended the Belvidere School and the Strathalbyn High School to Intermediate (Year 10) level, when he left to become a farmer. His interest in the natural environment began in childhood and continued as he shared his father's and brothers' interests in fishing and duck-shooting. A keen sportsman, John followed the fortunes of local, state and national cricket and football teams throughout life, but a football knee injury around 1960 led to his decision to take a greater interest in birds.

John and his brother Brian knew the quail and other birds that occupied farm paddocks and had been aware for some years that, while most of the smaller (Button-)quail had white flanks, there were some whose flanks were yellow. When one was killed in farm machinery in 1955 John prepared and dried its skin as he would a rabbit pelt and sent it in to the South Australian Museum. He was advised that it had arrived in a "damaged" state but, when he later spoke to the Curator of Birds, H. T. (Herb) Condon, he learnt that Red-chested Button-quail were considered rare for South Australia. Thus began a long information-exchanging association with Herb, but when John told the Curator all that he claimed he could see in the area near his farm, "Nappyalla", southeast of Langhorne Creek, Herb said he would need to provide more than just his word. The definitive value of the voucher specimen was therefore instilled in him at an early stage and John was ultimately responsible for donating over 800

bird specimens to the museum, many being first records for the Strathalbyn district and at least nine the first for the State. John was also encouraged to build his own reference collection to use as a resource for local ornithologists, so he learnt how to prepare bird study skins and acquired appropriate collecting permits. Some specimens he targeted for research projects; others were opportunistic (beach-washed seabirds and the like), collected by him and numerous other people. Never one to squander a good record, John could turn anything into a skin, even decomposing road-kills that most taxidermists would shun. This private collection was always intended for deposition in the museum and is now being curated there as "The John Eckert Collection".

After Herb Condon retired, John worked closely with the next Curator of Birds, Shane Parker, and gave him much valuable field assistance. He was instrumental in filling many glaring gaps in the museum collection, particularly of waders and of waterbirds from the Murray Mallee (Editors' Note: see John's article in this issue). In recognition of his contributions, Shane arranged for John's appointment at the museum as Honorary Research Worker (Ornithology) in 1976 and Honorary Associate in 1986. John occupied this position for the rest of his life, and gave assistance and advice to many museum staff members.

When John's bird studies began to take shape as a serious pursuit, he joined the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union and Bird Observers Club in 1962, the South

Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) in 1963 and the Field Naturalists' Society of South Australia in 1986, and in 1964 was invited to become a member of the Adelaide Ornithologists' Club. He continued lifelong membership of all five societies and on 25 October 2002 was made an Honorary Member of the SAOA. Soon after joining, John began to make regular contact with Bob Brown, Secretary to the SAOA, and Roy Wheeler, a most eminent member of the Bird Observers' Club. Roy was well known to hold strong anti-collecting views yet he made and kept a lasting friendship with John. Field guides of the time were quite primitive and John had what was available, including Leach's "An Australian Bird Book" and Condon's paperback field guides to waders and hawks, the former with A. R. McGill. Through Wheeler John corresponded with Fred Smith who had reported both Long-toed Stint and White-winged Black Tern in Victoria. John soon had specimens of both, first records for the State, but when he found Condon away from the museum and unable to receive the Stint he left the specimen with a prominent local ornithologist who, after he had shown it to another eminent expert, reported: "we've come to the conclusion it might be what you say it is". While amused at the response, John recognised that it confirmed the need for more detailed information and dissemination of knowledge on Australian birds, particularly the difficult to identify groups such as waders and terns in non-breeding plumage. He therefore published the results of his observations and collecting, principally in the South Australian Ornithologist, and his numerous publications are a valuable addition to the ornithological literature (see bibliography below). An outstanding example is his landmark study with Shane Parker of the fieldwrens (Parker and Eckert 1983).

John was a foundation member of the Strathalbyn Naturalists Club when it was established in July 1962 and only four

months later he was "dobbed in" by Inez Gemmell to take over from the inaugural President who had been transferred out of the district. He remained President until his death nearly 46 years later and led the Club to a position of strength and authority that allowed it in 2000 to publish "Natural History of Strathalbyn and Goolwa Districts", one of the most comprehensive records of its type from any region in Australia. Two essential features of meetings of the "Strath Nats" under John's chairmanship were the identification and/or discussion of a variety of items collected by members and the calling for any interesting bird observations. The result of the first was a steady flow to the South Australian Museum not only of bird specimens but mammals, reptiles, fish and invertebrates as well. The second activity resulted in an accumulation of knowledge of the birds of the district, and particularly the confirmation of John's earlier but disputed assertion that certain species such as Masked and White-browed Woodswallows, Cockatiel, Budgerigars (and others) were regular, if variable spring-summer migrants to the district. Parallel with his leadership of the "Strath Nats" John began, on 7 March 1963, a regular column called "About our birds" in the local weekly newspaper "The Southern Argus", writing under the pseudonym "Robin", and this column continued to appear in most editions until his final contribution published just two days before he died. The column was authoritative and well researched and publicised the observations of a very large number of members and other local people, contributing thereby to the pool of local knowledge and providing feedback and motivation to bird watchers at the same time.

Few if any were as familiar with the history and literature of the birds of South Australia as John Eckert whose memory of the contents of papers and their authors in the South Australian Ornithologist and elsewhere was truly remarkable. He could

(and would) discourse at length on a variety of ornithological matters with anyone, from interested beginners to scientists of international standing, one of whom, in a letter of condolence to his family, described John's deep and accurate knowledge as "intimidating". He gave his time generously to keen and intelligent younger bird watchers, several of whom have established themselves at national or international levels and his knowledge and expertise were sought by teachers and students of tertiary institutions to within a few days of his death.

John had a well developed, quirky and slightly teasing sense of humour and this is illustrated by two personal anecdotes. At the launch of "Natural History of Strathalbyn and Goolwa Districts" one of us (ABB) asked the authors of each chapter to sign his copy. The author of the chapter on ants, Ross Robinson, wrote provocatively; "Ants are better than Birds". On reading this John quickly added; "(ask any anteater)". The same (ABB) reported to John the sighting of a White-winged Triller near Milang on 9 August 1992, a date much earlier than had been recorded previously in the district, mid to late September being more usual. A year later John could only acknowledge that record in his column as "30 August 1992" while reporting a Triller seen at the same place by many SAOA members on 29 August 1993. Later still he accepted a sighting elsewhere for 20 August 1995. When challenged about his reluctance to accept the first August record he excused himself by saying he could not accept everything claimed by a sun-affected rabbit-fumigater. His standards for the vetting of records were high and remained that way.

John's contribution to conservation was also exemplary; he was a strong and vocal supporter of the introduction of vegetation clearance controls in 1983 and took the initiative to protect about 280 hectares of native vegetation in three separate Heritage

Agreements. He led a group of members of the duck-hunting organisation, Ducks Unlimited, to rehabilitate and maintain Tolderol Game Reserve for waterbird conservation after it had lost its function for duck-shooting. He was at the forefront of the local group that took responsibility for managing the vegetated former Sandergrove to Milang railway corridor, now Nurragi Conservation Reserve and he was vitally involved in the Strathalbyn Naturalists project to re-vegetate the Langhorne Creek Cemetery Reserve. He was at times a member of three separate National Parks Consultative Committees.

Treated for heart disease for several years, John died suddenly alongside his tractor while feeding his livestock on Saturday 21 June 2008 and is survived by two sons and two daughters and their partners and eleven grandchildren.

Sources: family members; several conversations between ABB and HJE, 1999 to 2007; obituary by Ross Robinson published in "The Southern Argus" 17 July 2008.

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