

Obituary: Harold Walter Crouch

14 October 1922 to 22 March 2009

Long-term Member and Pioneer Recorder of Bird Song

DAVID ROBERTSON

Harold Walter Crouch (Hal) was one of the first, if not the first, to record Australian bird song and even this achievement came by chance. In his early years he was a self-taught wireless operator. During World War II he served firstly on the minesweeper HMAS Pirie and then in wireless stations in New Guinea and New Britain. Getting close enough to record the enemy was not encouraged/advisable. He was demobbed in Darwin in 1946. Despite not knowing how to drive he bought an ex-army three ton truck and drove south, learning to drive on the 3000 km drive to Adelaide. Back in Adelaide he joined the Post Master General's Department, which begat Telecom which begat Telstra.

In 1947 he married Audrey and set up home in Belair, in the Adelaide Hills. Their marriage was to last 55 years. In the early '50's he bought a large reel to reel tape recorder, not for recording birds - that came later, but for recording family gatherings and birthday parties.

Sound recording encourages one to listen, to everything. All sounds become important, even if it is only the buzz of a fly that disturbs the recording. Sub-consciously one becomes not only aware of the unusual but interested in it. One day Hal heard what was to him an unusual bird call, which he taped and took to the SA Museum. The Curator of Birds, Herb Condon, identified it as a Grey Shrike-thrush.

Many years later it was this innate curiosity and interest that prompted Hal to conduct his own research into the pre-dawn calls of the White-plumed Honeyeater starting from his back garden (Crouch, 2001 a, b) This was a real labour of love. Three times a week, whatever

the weather, for two and a half years Hal was out of bed 90 minutes before dawn to start recording. He discovered that the honeyeater produced a completely different call from the usual call one hears during the day. He confirmed his discoveries in Alice Springs, Bendigo and Geraldton.

When he started, sound recording of wild life was in its infancy. One had to make do with what was available. In an attempt to produce a directional microphone, Hal used a microphone mounted inside a truck headlamp reflector. Later in the 60s he graduated to a portable Superscope recorder with a home-made fibreglass parabolic reflector 70 cm (28 inch) in diameter. The recorder was portable in the sense that it could be carried, but only just. So Hal designed and made a leather harness to carry it. In 1964 Hal joined the SAOA and soon became the unofficial Hon Curator of Bird Songs. His services were often needed at SAOA meetings to produce bird calls to illustrate talks.

In 1965 he recorded the Western Whipbird on the York Peninsula and later in the Flinders Chase on Kangaroo Island. This was the first time the bird had been recorded.

In 1973 he produced a long-running audio-visual display of local birds in the East Parklands of Adelaide at the request of the Adelaide City Council. This comprised life-sized models of birds crafted and painted by Audrey with a continuous tape system. It was operational for some years. This led to the production of the first cassette of bird song in Australia in 1974. It contained 41 recordings and was entitled "Song Birds of Australia". Hal produced the recordings, Audrey designed and

painted the cover and between them they wrote and narrated the script. This was the first of over 20 titles covering birds in all States of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Sixteen thousand copies were sold.

At the invitation of the ABC he produced 'Bird of the Week' which ran for 18 months. One segment featured the 'Sabre-toothed Thornbill', a small but fierce predator of the desert regions which had evolved over the years the ability to fly backwards (imitating the hummingbirds of South America) during desert storms so as to keep the dust and sand out of its eyes. It was broadcast on April 1st.

I first met Hal in 1982 when I moved to Eden Hills from Melbourne. I already knew of him through Rex Buckingham who was to become editor the BOC's *Field Guide to Australian Bird Song*. Rex and I had taped birds in Victoria but with different ends in view. Rex was already compiling calls for the Field Guide, which was to take 16 years. I merely wanted to be able to playback bird calls so as to lure them into view. Rex and Hal's equipment was far too cumbersome for me. I did not want a bulky tape recorder, a parabolic reflector, a metre long directional microphone and portable amplifiers. I could remember staggering around O'Reilly's in 1976 weighed down with equipment whilst trying unsuccessfully to tape a Noisy Pitta

When I met Hal I explained my problem. Could he help? I had already found out that small cassette recorders, i.e. the Walkman, could not amplify the calls sufficiently. Hal's solution was to think laterally. If you can't amplify the call after you have recorded it, why not amplify it before? So he filled a little black box not much bigger than a match box with diodes and anodes and powered by a 9 volt battery. It was placed between my very simple microphone and my cassette recorder. It amplified the calls *before* they were recorded. It worked perfectly. In June 1989 I was at Seal Bay on Kangaroo Island when I heard the distinctive squeaky cartwheel

call of the Western Whipbird coming from the dense coastal scrub. I taped it for a few seconds and then played it back. A surprised Whipbird popped his head up out of the scrub, spotted me and vanished. I have heard the Whipbird on several occasions since but that was the only time I have seen it. I have had the black box for over 20 years and it has been round the world with me. Hal not only recorded birds he could scare them. He created a bird scarer for orchards and vineyards which won first prize for the 'Best Farm Aid' at the Royal Agricultural Show in 1985

For 50 years Hal recorded a wide range of birds firstly in South Australia, then in Australia and eventually in Papua New Guinea. He contributed to the national catalogue of Australian bird songs, was a Life Member of the Australian Wild Life Sound Recording Group and on 6 May 1990 was awarded Honorary Life Membership of the SAOA in acknowledgment of his services to the Association over many years and his contributions to the recording of birds songs.

It was standing room only at his funeral at Kalyra on 25 March 2009. At the end of the service there was a few moments silence. As if on cue, two Kookaburras began calling loudly just outside the chapel. It was a fitting farewell.

I am grateful to Howard Playwright and to Andrew, Hal's son, for assistance in compiling this obituary.

PUBLICATIONS:

Crouch, H.W. 2001a. Strange bird song before daylight. *Audio Wings* 4: 8 - 13.

Crouch, H.W. 2001b. The Pre-dawn calls of the White-plumed Honeyeater *Lichenostomus pencillatuus*. *South Australian Ornithologist* 33: 156 - 163.

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