

Historical Series No 73.

Edwin Ashby (1861-1941)

Quaker, Naturalist and Plant Enthusiast.

Part 2 by Penny Paton

Part 1 detailed Edwin Ashby's family background and explored his contribution to Australian ornithology, particularly his work in Western Australia and New South Wales. Here I describe his ornithological fieldwork in Victoria and South Australia.

I have already mentioned an early trip to Victoria in 1886, and Ashby continued to visit that state on many occasions. At Mount Dandenong in October 1914 he saw Superb Lyrebirds, described other birds not found in his home state and took a specimen of a breeding male Rose Robin that was in female plumage (Ashby 1915b). Thirty-four years after his first visit to Gippsland, Ashby returned in the first week of April 1920 (Ashby 1920b). He bemoaned the vegetation clearance that had taken place around Yinnar in the intervening years, with "miles and miles of rung timber", referring to the ring-barked eucalypts. As brown coal had been mined in Gippsland since the 1880s, it seems likely that the 1920 visit was in relation to a mining venture. Ashby noted the disappearance of two species seen in 1886, namely the Large-billed Scrubwren and the Pink Robin, but went on to list some of the birds that could still be seen in the vicinity.

Probably on the same trip in 1920, was an Easter visit to the fern gullies, presumably near Melbourne, with some friends in search of what must have been one of Ashby's favourite birds, the Superb Lyrebird (Ashby 1920c). They stalked a calling bird for some time in the pouring rain, removing their mackintoshes to avoid the swishing noise that they were making in case it disturbed the lyrebird. They were treated to an amazing performance when they

finally caught up with this bird. They recognised the calls of at least eleven bird species, including two species of cockatoo, Eastern Whipbird, Grey Butcherbird, Australian Magpie, Golden Whistler and Grey Shrikethrush.

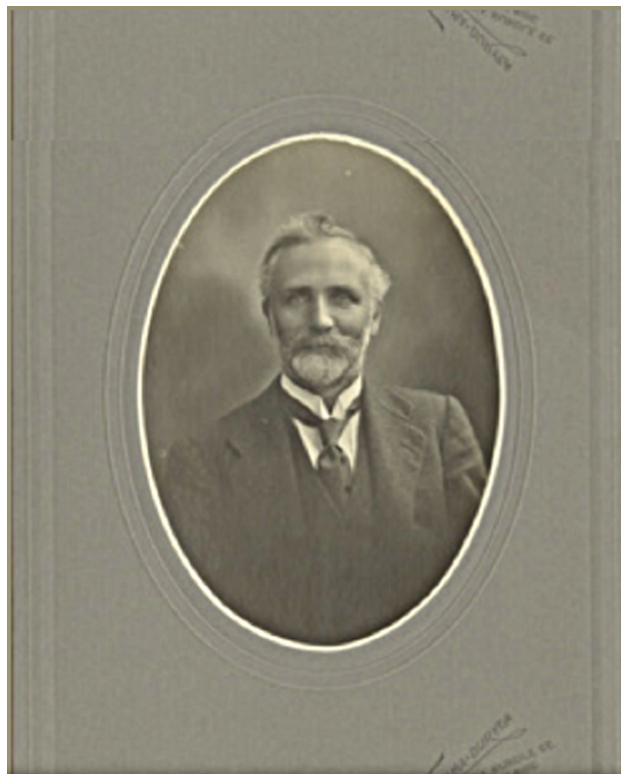


Photo 3 – Edwin Ashby in about 1925, aged in his mid-sixties, from the Thelma-Duryea photographic studio (courtesy State Library of South Australia B70984/4)

The 24th RAOU Congress, held in Melbourne in September 1925, was the first one in that city for eleven years due to the Great War (1914-18) during which none were held. Ashby was not present at the Congress but other members read two papers by him on silvereyes and currawongs. (Dickison 1926). However, Ashby did join the Campout held at Murrayville, in the Big Desert region of Victoria, although he wrongly gave the date as 1924 in a note to *Emu* on the occurrence there of the Inland Thornbill, based on a specimen he collected and compared with examples in the H. L. White Collection in the Melbourne Museum (Ashby 1927c). Photo 3 is a portrait of Ashby at about this time, when he was in his mid-sixties.

Only a year later Ashby was back in Victoria, visiting the Short-tailed Shearwater rookery at Cape Woolamai, on Phillip Island, with that noted Victorian ornithologist and oologist, A.J. Campbell (Ashby 1928b). The skipper of the ketch which transported them, John Burgess, was able to provide additional information on birds that traverse Bass Strait, as well as giving them information on the many seabird rookeries on the Bass Strait islands, including small islands off King and Flinders Islands and those near Wilson's Promontory and near the Tasmanian coast.

A fortnight in the Grampians in mid-October 1925, based at Hall's Gap, allowed Ashby to explore not

just the avifauna but also the botany of this unique and spectacular area (Ashby 1927d). His collecting was limited by the conditions of his permit to examples of four bird genera and only two pairs of each, so he spent much of his time collecting plants instead which he sent to a friend, Dr A. B. Rendle, Keeper of Botany at the British Museum (Natural History) from 1906 to 1930. Ashby listed all the species of birds seen and gave details of the few specimens of *Acanthiza* (thornbill), *Sericornis* (scrubwren) and *Strepera* (currawong) taken. The local Grey Currawongs were disliked by landowners due to their depredations on fowl eggs and fruit in the orchards.

In February 1927, Ashby paid a visit to the South East of South Australia and continued on to Western Victoria (Ashby 1927e). As is typical for this time of year, the weather was extremely hot but, despite this, on arriving at Nelson on the Glenelg River, Ashby went for a long walk and, in company with Mr Simson, searching for the Ground Parrot, without success. They were welcomed by Mr Donovan who lived on the three mile stretch of the river on the SA side of the border at Donovan's Landing, and who showed them hospitality as well as a mounted specimen of a Ground Parrot. They spent a few days around Port Fairy and Warrnambool before returning to South Australia on the homeward leg.

Naturally most of Ashby's travels and birdwatching were in his home state and no doubt not all were written up and published. Mention has been made of early visits to the tip of Yorke Peninsula and the plains west of Adelaide in 1886, but published accounts include trips to Kangaroo Island, the River Murray, Port Willunga, Mount Compass, Cape Jervis, the mid-North, the mallee near Pungonda and mallee east of Adelaide in the vicinity of Chaunceys Line.

Ashby paid several visits to the mid-North, the first documented visit was in November 1900, when he was on the eastern side of the Flinders Ranges about 35 miles east of Peterborough (which at that time was called Petersburg), where he encountered the White-winged Fairywren (Ashby 1917c). Then in September 1916 he journeyed to Port Germein in company with Frank Parsons and Maurice Edward Saunders, the son of his cousin Ernest (Ashby 1917c). Maurice, who was born in 1888, joined the RAOU in 1916 and probably worked with his father in the company Saunders and Ashby, as his address was the company's Adelaide address. They were searching for what we now know as Splendid Fairywren, that Ashby said was 'only met with in a narrow strip of salt-bush country between the Flinders Ranges and Spencer Gulf ... between Port Germein and Port Augusta' (see below). Ashby (1917c) provided notes on other bird species seen and collected in the vicinity of Clare, Nackara, Crystal Brook and Port Pirie. The party also visited Wirrabara, as Ashby wrote a paper on the vexed

taxonomy of the Crimson Rosella and documented shooting two adult Yellow Rosellas from a flock at Wirrabara in September 1916 (Ashby 1917d). In this paper Ashby described *Platycercus elegans fleurieuensis*, the Fleurieu Peninsula population of the Adelaide Rosella, which is still recognised today (Horton *et al.* 2018).

The taxonomy of the Splendid Fairywren *Malurus splendens* was in a very confused state at this time and Ashby (1917c) only muddied the waters further. On this trip Ashby and his party collected one coloured male of what he called *Malurus melanotus whitei*, originally described as *Malurus whitei* by Campbell (1902). However, a footnote to Ashby's (1917c) article states that on comparing this specimen with seven specimens of *Malurus callainus* (then considered a full species – the Turquoise Wren), he thought that Campbell's *M. whitei* should be regarded as a synonym of *M. callainus*. Unbeknownst to Ashby, *M. whitei* was based on specimens from central New South Wales (Longmore 1991), not 'Interior South Australia' as stated by Mathews (1912), and is now regarded as a synonym of Black-backed Fairywren *M. splendens melanotus*, which subspecies in South Australia occurs east of the Mount Lofty and Flinders Ranges. The population around Port Germein had in fact been described by Mathews (1912) as *M. germaini* but, because of cumulative errors in the literature, the name 'whitei' stuck for this population for decades, for example in the paper on the limits of subspecies of *M. splendens* in South Australia by Reid *et al.* (1977). *Malurus germaini* is now regarded as a synonym of *M. splendens callainus* (which occurs west of the Flinders Ranges), although there remain questions as to the exact identity of this population (P. Horton pers. comm.).

Ashby published a paper on some of the bird species seen and collected on two trips to Kangaroo Island in 1905 (Ashby 1926b). The first trip was in March of that year and the second was in October as part of the Campout following the AOU's Congress held in Adelaide. The Campout occupied ten days, under the leadership of J. W. Mellor, with the travellers embarking on the steamer *Governor Musgrave* at Henley Beach on the morning of 14th October, and not arriving at Snelling Beach near Middle River on Kangaroo Island until after dark (Australasian Ornithologists' Union 1906).

Excursions were made to Stokes Bay, Western River, the upper reaches of the Cygnet River and Cape Borda and 70 bird species were recorded over the ten days (Campbell 1906). Ashby does not record the reason for his March 1905 trip to the Island, but it is possible he was scouting for places to take the AOU members later in the year. In March he visited Middle River and Stokes Bay and met with Mr H. George Bell, who provided advice to the organisers and a house for the members' use in October (Australasian Ornithologists' Union 1906).

Very little ornithological work had been carried out on the Island by the early years of the twentieth century, and in March Ashby (1926b) collected the first examples of the Glossy Black Cockatoo for South Australia and documented the first record of the Southern Emu-wren from Kangaroo Island, a bird killed by Mr Bell's dog at Stokes Bay.

An intriguing photo (Photo 4) taken on the AOU Campout in October 1905 shows five women outside a tent and, by cross-referencing the women present on the camp (Australasian Ornithologists' Union 1906), we can deduce that the two older women are Mrs A.J. Campbell and Miss Margaret Ashby (Edwin's older sister) and that the three younger women are from the group of four young women attending — Miss Ellie Campbell, the Misses Barbara and Winifred Mellor (sisters of J. W. Mellor) and Miss A. Dethbridge. Mr and Mrs A.J. Campbell's son, A.G. Campbell, was also a member of the party and we can assume that Miss Dethbridge is Amy, who married A.G. Campbell on 29th June 1907.

Other short ornithological trips within South Australia included two to Schwetze's (*sic*) Landing on the River Murray in January 1911 and January 1912 (Ashby 1912a, Ashby 1912b). Schuetze Landing is north-east of Mannum and Ashby investigated the mallee about 5 miles east of the River, where he described some of the bird species met with (Ashby 1912b) and the collection of a Black-eared Miner in the mallee and a Noisy Miner along the River in 1912 (Ashby 1912a). A short note documented a brief visit to Port Willunga in April 1914 (Ashby 1914a). An Easter 1917 visit to Cape Jervis with Frank Parsons contributed to Ashby's research into the Crimson/Adelaide Rosella complex (Ashby 1917d). Later that year in September, Ashby was again in the mallee, but this time at Pungonda near the Victorian border with Frank Parsons and his cousin's son, Maurice Saunders. Ashby wrote two short papers on this trip, the first listed most of the 70 bird species seen and gave some breeding records and the specimens secured (Ashby 1918a). Ashby (1918b) gave more details of a few of the bird species that the party saw and a briefer description of the soils and habitat of the area.



**Photo 4 - Women attending AOU Campout
October 1905, Middle River, Kangaroo Island
(courtesy State Library of South Australia B57823/11)**

A day trip along Chance's Line (now known as Chauncey's Line Road) with Frank Parsons and J. Neil McGilp in September 1919 gives a glimpse of this area from one hundred years ago (Ashby 1920d). Within a mile of Woodchester the party met with mallee that continued for some miles along the road that was "metalled 40 to 60 years ago, with the intention of its becoming the main coach road to Melbourne, via Wellington". Ashby described this patch of mallee as large and suggested that several square miles of this vegetation should be preserved by the government, which did eventuate many years later, in 1983, with the proclamation of the 240 ha Ferries McDonald Conservation Park. Many of the bird species encountered were described and Ashby was particularly interested in specimens of the Elegant and the Blue-winged Parrot from the same vicinity.

Just after Christmas 1919, Ashby, Parsons and McGilp spent two days in the Mount Compass district, a place Ashby had longed to spend more time in than the occasional hour when *en route* to Victor Harbor (Ashby 1920e). The group of ornithologists were particularly interested in the Mount Compass area due to the rare bird species that had been sent from there to the South Australian Museum more than thirty years previously. I surmise that Ashby was referring to specimens collected at least in part by F. W. Andrews, the topic of four Historical Series (Carpenter 2012 a,b,c; Carpenter 2013). Andrews was living in the Mount Compass area in the time leading up to his death in 1884 (Carpenter 2012a) and his specimens in the South Australian Museum, Adelaide (SAMA) from Mount Compass include Flame Robin, Chestnut-rumped Heathwren, Varied

Sittella and Southern Emuwren (P. Horton pers. comm.).

Amongst other species seen and collected by Ashby and his friends, they located the Southern Emuwren, the first time that any of the observers had seen this bird on the mainland of South Australia (Ashby 1920e). Ever the alert observer, Ashby was convinced that the skins of emuwrens from Mt Compass were different in colouration from those from Victoria, Tasmania and Kangaroo Island and he named this bird *Stipiturus malachurus intermedius* (Ashby 1920e), today a recognised subspecies that is listed as Critically Endangered.

Some small quails that were flushed were considered to be King Quails, a species that Ashby had never seen in South Australia and in which state it is now considered extinct. Locals told them that this species came into their gardens later in the season and promised to send word when they returned. Word came in February 1920 that the King Quails were about and the group of three men returned, only to find that the birds had not been seen in the gardens but rather in a swamp close by. Despite finding them hard to flush, two specimens of male King Quails were collected and several females were seen. Ashby showed skins of several rare birds, including the Ground Parrot, to their local informants, who said that the parrot had not been seen for many years (Ashby 1920e).

For a week in February 1927 Ashby repeated a trip taken by other members of the SAOA in the previous spring to the South East of South Australia (Ashby 1927f). He went to Waltowa Swamp and made brief stops at Chinamans Well on the Coorong, at Kingston, Robe and near Beachport. After several days in adjacent Victoria, Ashby returned to Adelaide via Port MacDonnell, Naracoorte, Robe and Woods Well. The extremely hot weather and the time of year worked against seeing the numbers and richness of birds seen by the group in 1926, but Ashby was pleased to collect two specimens of the Grey-crowned Babbler near Kingston and to find a dead corvid near Naracoorte. While he was skinning the corvid in a hotel in Naracoorte (which shows how times have changed in nearly one hundred years!) he was approached by a young kangaroo shooter who told him that there were two species of corvid in the district, a smaller one that lived in the "scrub", while the other one inhabited the open river red gum country. The young man also told him that the small one was much less common than the other and had a different call — "more squeaky and without the croak of the ordinary Crow." It is likely that these observations relate to the Forest Raven (the larger bird with the more croaky call) and the Little Raven (the smaller bird), which was not recognised until 1970 (Higgins *et al.* 2006).

In addition to his own fieldwork, Ashby corresponded with and received specimens from C.E. May, a collector of skins and eggs, who lived in the Northern

Territory from the 1880s to about 1920 (Horton *et al.* 2018). Born in Adelaide in 1856, May worked in the mining and pearl fishing industries and collected natural history specimens, including bird skins and egg clutches during 1891-1916, mainly in the vicinity of Darwin and Port Keats, for SAMA (*ibid.*). May sent specimens to Ashby from the Pine Creek area in the Northern Territory in about 1914 (Ashby 1914b, Ashby 1915c), from which Ashby described several new subspecies, although all are now synonyms (*ibid.*). It is also likely that the specimens that Ashby sent to Mathews for his *Birds of Australia* volumes (1910-27) from the Port Keats area were collected by May. Ashby (1906) wrote a note for *Emu*, detailing field notes written by May from Port Keats, where he was living at the time.

As we have seen Ashby was a keen collector of bird skins but the extent of his skin collection will never be known. After deciding by 1920 to donate his skin collection to SAMA and only weeks before the handover, a bushfire in March 1934 destroyed his home and most of his collections (Horton *et al.* 2018). Fortunately his chiton collection and some bird skins had already been donated to SAMA, he had sent skins to Gregory Mathews for his *Birds of Australia*, had presented over 400 bird specimens to the American Museum of Natural History in 1920 and 1923 and exchanged specimens with other museums (*ibid.*) and probably other collectors also. Both the H.L. White and the S.A. White Collections contain specimens collected by Ashby, as do the Western Australia Museum and the British Museum of Natural History. Ashby is represented in the SAMA collection by about 377 study skins, a few skeletons, nests and mounted birds, and six egg clutches. There are 16 egg clutches derived from C.E. May in the SAOA Egg Collection that went to SAMA in 1932 and these probably came via Edwin Ashby.

Two suitcases containing over 200 specimens from Ashby's skin collection are in the possession of a family member. These include birds collected by C. E. May, J. Sharp and Edwin's son, Keith Ashby, but most were probably collected by Edwin. The birds were collected from all Australian states and the Northern Territory, from 1889 until 1936, with the majority from South Australia. There are also some specimens from Central and South America, including about 25 hummingbirds, which Ashby was particularly interested in.

Ashby described many birds which are detailed in Horton *et al.* (2018), but only three are currently recognised today — the Fleurieu Peninsula population of the Adelaide Rosella, the Mt. Lofty Ranges population of the Southern Emuwren and the Gibberbird *Ashbyia lovensis* (*ibid.*).

Edwin Ashby part 3 will be published in the Summer edition of The Birder.