

# ***SAOA Historical Series No 26***

## ***Walter J Harvey Part III***

Unlike the 'crows' most birds were not a nuisance and most of Walter's letters describe the first sighting of a species for the season, nesting activities and unusually large numbers of some birds. For example on 8 April 1929 15 Galahs were noted; this species was first observed in the spring of 1925 and since then had come and gone with no particular pattern. A pair of Galahs nested nearby in the spring of 1929 and Walter gave all four fledglings away after the parents had raised them, thinking that this was a better result than having them shot due to their rarity. A letter of 11 May 1933 details his first record of nesting Cockatiels – a telegraph linesman found a nest with 5 eggs in a belt of timber on Harvey's property late in October 1932. The young were taken for cage birds once they had reached a suitable age. In all nine adult Cockatiels were seen about this time and another pair must have nested as Harvey saw three young birds in the middle of November.

Walter was struck with the beauty of Rainbow Lorikeets and uses the sighting of a few in December 1932 to note that they have never been a common bird in his time at Coombe. The only other records I can find in the correspondence are a pair in December 1929, which was the first record since 15/9/27. Both Musk and Purple-crowned were more common – in May 1933 the "gums" were flowering and both species were present. Five smaller lorikeets were with them and he speculated whether they were Little Lorikeets. There are few mentions of Regent Parrots - a pair was sighted on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1929 with a flock of 15 on 21<sup>st</sup> January and four on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1930. Later, in summer 1931, he notes to Sutton that this is the first year that they have not been seen since noticed four to five years ago.

Mallee ringnecks were another nuisance bird for the settlers and all sorts of devices were used to mitigate this. Walter's fruit trees had produced their best crops in 1932-33 and much of the early fruit was saved due to a nesting

pair of Collared Sparrowhawks that cleaned up every bird smaller than a magpie. However much of the later crop was lost to the parrots. Some of the Tintinara folk tethered young Collared Sparrowhawks in their gardens and the parents continuing to feed them kept the parrots away. Walter saw this as an advantage for the sparrowhawks which were otherwise likely to be destroyed due no doubt to their propensity for taking chickens.

Young of Eastern Rosellas and ringnecks were reported as early as mid-August in 1929. Still on parrots, Walter reports that the few budgerigars around in November 1928 were the first he has seen for ten years. Nine budgerigars on October 29<sup>th</sup> 1932 were the first for that season and then for three or four months they were fairly numerous, although never in large flocks. Walter often reports the "first for the season", for example he recorded the first Pallid Cuckoo for 1933 on May 11<sup>th</sup> and notes that he has seen the first for the season in the same 200 acre patch of scrub and grassland nearly every year. Other birds turned up regularly; for example the first migratory robin for the season was seen on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1930 – an uncoloured Flame Robin.

The attitudes to taking birds from the wild were very different almost a century ago as evidenced by this story from Walter. His father wanted a pair of Grey Butcherbirds for his garden (presumably to keep other birds away from his produce) so Walter took two young from their nest near his house and placed them in a cage. The parents continued to feed them "on the cut meat that I gave them every day, pieces of small snakes & lizards, blow flies, cockroaches & pieces of young birds taken from nests, after a fortnight of poking the food into their beaks they decided that it was time for them (the young ones) to forage for themselves as far as circumstances would permit so from then on the food was dropped straight onto the floor of the cage, after a hunger strike of a day or so the youngsters "took a tumble" & fed themselves." Ever the

naturalist Harvey reports that the young cast out pellets, about the size of a silkworm chrysalis, in the same way that owls do. He also tells of seeing an adult butcherbird killing a foot long snake by holding it by the head and knocking it against a branch.

Walter apparently saw *The Advertiser*, at least occasionally, as he tells Sutton in 1931 that an article therein described quail in large numbers. He goes on to say that sometime between March and June 1925 when ploughing in wheat stubble over about 30 acres he disturbed thousands of Stubble Quail over a two day period. Walter's father had done some quail shooting in the distant past and had never seen anything to equal it. Sutton replied that he had never seen more than a few at a time and, on questioning 'Rufus', that person had only seen them in hundreds. The Harveys seemed to swap ornithological stories as a letter from Walter of October 1932 relates two stories from Salisbury. The first concerned magpies attempting to incorporate into their nest a 6 foot long piece of 8 gauge wire with a big bend in the middle. They battled for two days, singly and as a pair, before giving it up. The second was about a rogue pair of Kookaburras that had been favourites but had taken to killing chickens; they killed 11 out of 13 in a few days, but did not eat or remove the carcasses. It is not clear if these were adult or young chickens.

One of Walter's most significant ornithological records was not recognised as such immediately due to the lack of knowledge about so many species and their distribution in the 1920s and 30s. Harvey collected two specimens of emu-wrens in his time at Coombe and these were the subject of the later correspondence between Sutton and Harvey in 1935 and 1936 after Walter had left Coombe for Waterloo. We have carbon copies of several letters written by Sutton asking Walter to give more information about the country where his emu-wrens were taken. Sutton details that the bird collected on 5/11/25 with a chestnut forehead was diagnosed as a Mallee Emu-wren. Likewise the female emu-wren received on 18/11/30 (which did not have a chestnut forehead) was classed as a Mallee

Emu-wren on the locality. Sutton was uneasy with this diagnosis as recently several Mallee Emu-wrens had been collected in SA and Victoria near Pinnaroo, with both sexes having the chestnut forehead and blue ear-coverts. He noted that the Coombe birds had dirty white or brownish ear coverts.

In fact Walter had ascribed the latter bird, secured on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1930 from an area of ti tree and cutting grass (*Gahnia* sp.), to Southern Emu-wren. He wrongly gives the date of collection as 8<sup>th</sup> November in his 26<sup>th</sup> February 1936 reply to Sutton in which he describes more fully the area where it was collected:

"The soil was of a blackish-grey colour, heavy but loamy, vegetated well with Ti Tree and Cutting Grass (?Sps.) with occasional (sic) White Mallee. In a wet year this class of country is often under water for a long time (up to seven months) but during the average winter it only becomes boggy. My reason for taking this bird was that I suspected it to be *S. malachurus* & on examining and measuring it I thought that it was & was very disappointed when I got word back that it was *S. mallee*. However that is beside the point, but my impressions at the time were that although by the markings it was a female it was noticeably larger than the average run of Emu Wrens about."

The other emu-wren specimen, collected on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1928 was posted to the Museum on the 5<sup>th</sup> and hence that date has been attached to the specimen. Walter thought it was a Mallee Emu-wren, gives no description of the area where it was taken and sends a description of the colour of the soft parts: Iris – destroyed; Legs & feet – brown; Inside mouth – yellow. In the 26/2/36 letter he tells Sutton that this male bird "was taken on sand - hilly, open heath country, the vegetation being chiefly dwarf bull-oak (*Casuarina* sp.) Broad-leafed *Banksia* & *Spinifix* (*Triodia* sp.) with a sprinkling of White Mallee. The country had been burnt two & a half years previously. There were a number of birds in the colony & I secured a female as well but it received the full charge of shot or at least was very badly

damaged & I not realizing its possible value threw it away”.

We have Sutton’s carbon copy reply to Walter’s last letter in which he relates that in October 1930 at Sugarloaf Park five emu-wrens were taken, of which only three are extant as Mr Ashby’s were destroyed by fire. This dilemma was taken up in more recent times by John Eckert who published a paper in the *SA Ornithologist* (Eckert 1977). After examining the emu-wrens in the SA Museum collection he correctly assigned Harvey’s birds to two different species (as Harvey had thought at the time) and decided that the extant birds collected by SAOA members (at Sugarloaf Park in 1929 – my bolding) were all Southern Emu-wrens, not Mallee. Eckert also notes that Shane Parker (then curator of birds at the SA Museum) had recently spoken to Mr Harvey who confirmed that both his emu-wrens were taken half a mile from the Coombe Siding. So we know that Walter Harvey was still alive in the mid-1970s, when he would have been about 70 years old.

Living an outdoors life exposed Walter not only to the avifauna of his district but also to other animals. For example he deposited several specimens of snakes in the SA Museum in February 1930; a note in the margin of this letter in Sutton’s hand writing records that they were White-lipped Snakes *Denisonia coronoides*. Cogger (1992) lists *Drysdalia coronoides* as the White-lipped Snake and the distribution map shows this snake as just occurring in the Lower South-East of SA. Neither *Denisonia* species occurs in SA. Walter was particularly excited by the pygmy possum found in October 1930 in a fault at the base of a gum when chopping posts. He asks Mr Sutton to enquire of Mr Finlayson whether the Dormouse Opossum would occur in his district. He had hoped to keep the animal as a pet but it got its tail covered in honey which then stuck to the wool of his nest and managed to hang upside down until dead. This male specimen was the first seen in nine years in the district and Walter pickled it.

In his next letter of 18<sup>th</sup> November 1930 he asks that, if Mr Finlayson doesn’t need his

specimen and when he has compared it with those from Tintinara, the specimen be returned so he can send it “on to Boehm [who] is anxious to get hold of the small mammals of the ‘Desert’”. A week later he sends Sutton the details of the possum specimen, including size, colour and morphological details. He says here that Mr Finlayson can have the specimen if he wants it, but otherwise he will send it to Boehm. The next mention of mammals is in a letter of October 1932 wherein Harvey tells Sutton that he has had the good fortune to bring to Mr Finlayson’s attention a new species of mouse. He anticipates that he will be down from Adelaide for a few days to carry out his own observations. Frustratingly although his next letter records that Mr Finlayson spent a week over Easter 1933 with him and that Walter thoroughly enjoyed the experience, he does not tell us what occurred. Sutton’s carbon copy reply merely notes that Mr Finlayson “was greatly pleased with the outcome”!

The life that Walter and his brother led on the farm was no doubt a hard life but Walter is very matter-of-fact in his descriptions of the privations, long hours and back-breaking work. Usually he manages to see the funny side as well, at least after the event. For example in a letter of 8 April 1930 he describes how he went into town on Saturday to achieve three things – to vote, to wish Mr Butler the best of luck and to see Mr Filmer about emus. He doesn’t mention whether he saw Mr Butler, but Filmer had gone home and the polls closed at 7pm (and he arrived at 7.45). Walter comments: “to ride 25 miles in this country after a day’s work, on a wild goose chase is no fun I can assure you”. One matter that he didn’t see the funny side of was the erratic nature of the mail service. In his letter of 6 May 1929 he bemoans the delay of mail, acknowledging the arrival of Sutton’s letter posted on 6 April. Walter has complained repeatedly but to no effect. When one considers the difficult travelling conditions and the isolation of this area in the 1920s and 1930s it is not surprising that this one life-line to the outside world assumed such importance. *To be continued...*