

## SAOA HISTORICAL SERIES NUMBER 3

### HENRY B. BOSS-WALKER (PART III)

Some questions about birdcalls followed, the possibility of a single, guttural call being the Owllet-nightjar, various calls from a Boobook Owl or some other owl joining in, and the difference in the calls of the Striated, Yellow-tailed and Spotted Pardalotes. He mentioned Cayley's new book [What Bird is That? was first published in December 1931] but still preferred Leach's for identification of birds because of the verbal descriptions of markings, a check on inaccuracies in the colour plates. Although some variations in plumage are mentioned, he felt the lack of description of immature Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, immature Pallid Cuckoo, the female Darter, immature Golden Whistler, female Musk Duck, immature Nankeen Night-heron and female Magpies. He thought of going further north to the Riverina district of New South Wales (NSW) for the coming winter [no doubt for his health] but expected to find more new birds in that area. John Sutton's reply to this letter is missing.

#### More on Swifts, Songlarks and Eagles

Henry again wrote on 24 November 1932 from the address c/- Mrs F. R. Galbraith, Tyers, via Traralgon, Victoria. He expressed his gratitude for the useful information sent in the past and begged to trespass once again on John's time. Since January he had found more new birds at Macedon. Fork-tailed Swifts were first noticed on 5<sup>th</sup> March, and again the next day with Spine-tailed Swifts, which caused him to wonder if other observers have sometimes confused the White-rumped Swift (or House Swift — or did he mean the White-rumped Swiftlet that occurs in Qld?) with the Spine-tailed Swift. Henry had spent the winter from April to October in Deniliquin NSW on the Edward River, an anabranch of the Murray. New birds he encountered were the Striped Honeyeater, Crested Pigeon, Apostle Bird, Ring-necked Parrot, Bluebonnet, Yellow Rosella and Red-backed (now Red-rumped)

Parrot, the latter feeding on fallen pepper-tree berries on the footpath. On May 25<sup>th</sup> and driving with a restive horse, he was able to get only a quick look at a Black-faced Woodswallow. He noted a distinct lack of honeyeaters, lots of 'greenies' (White-plumed Honeyeaters), no Wattlebirds at all, many Noisy Miners, Noisy Friarbirds in the spring, just a few Striped and Blue-faced Honeyeaters and plenty of Galahs. In October hundreds of Budgerigars had arrived and probably Cockatiels — not seen very clearly. Spring also brought Brown Songlarks in plenty, he enjoyed their 'soaring' displays, but was disappointed with their 'song', not what he had read in Leach [1929 Leach states "fine songster, ranks with the Skylark"]. He asked John if he had ever seen a Rufous Songlark rise from the ground and soar and presumably sing [Leach 1929, "sings flying like a skylark"] as Henry had only seen it singing when perched on a tree or fence or when flying directly from one tree to another and adds "Has not this bird a charming tremolo call?"

He went on to ask the questions for which he needed John's advice — for a page and a half he described the calls from a crop, beginning on October 1<sup>st</sup> at Deniliquin and heard every day until he left for Gippsland where he also heard the same call daily (John Sutton decided it was the call of the Stubble Quail). He next queried large hawks seen in the air when the mice were still prevalent. He gave a good description with drawings of the markings of the underwing and guessed that they were Whistling Eagles (now Kites) and he wondered if another pair of hawks seen circling at a good height with slightly different markings could have been Little Eagles. He reminded John that he had once asked about an owl's call and, as he was still hearing it, wondered about the Spotted Owl [unsure about this species — sometimes referable to the Boobook Owl], not found in

South Australia (SA) and asked John if he knew of anyone in Victoria or NSW who might help him. He ended by tendering his belated thanks for the SA Orns John had sent in February and wrote "The thoroughness of the ornithologists in your state impresses me when I read the magazine".

From his home at 12 Fullarton Rd, Mitcham, John Sutton replied on 4 December 1932 and answered Henry's various queries. Re the Fork-tailed or White-rumped Swift, he had only seen them once overhead at home on 27th January 1932 between 7.15pm and 7.35pm ranging from 150-1000 feet (50-300m). At this time he wrote there was no record of spine-tailed swifts in SA and he lamented the absence of any bird observers in the South East as Dr C. Sullivan had seen them at Dartmoor, Victoria, 20 miles from the SA border on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1925. He was dubious of Victorian and Tasmanian records of both species being seen together, he himself had seen Spine-tailed Swifts only in NSW and Victoria. For the Yellow Rosella, the splash of red on the breast that Henry had noted on a few of the birds was considered to be a sign of age as Henry had guessed. The Black-faced Woodswallows — from Henry's description it undoubtedly was. Cockatiel — the white wing patches noted by Henry would confirm this diagnosis. Brown Songlarks — not a musical song but continuous in the breeding season from dawn to dusk. Rufous Songlark — there are 3 calls, one in flight, one like a soliloquy when sitting on a tree and the third, the beautiful tremolo Henry had remarked on. A Victorian version is rather odd, John Sutton quoted it as "Did you brick your teapot?" Stubble Quail — birds in crops call at dusk and on moonlit nights as Henry had reported, as well as during the day. But he warned that the Horsfield's Bushlark (now Singing Bushlark) was a good imitator and would give the songs of birds in the neighbourhood and does frequent crops. Whistling eagle — Henry's drawing of the underwing pattern fitted this species but again warned that although the whistle is quite unmistakable, the Starling

gave a good imitation. As for the Little Eagle, he thought it more likely to be another Whistling Eagle. John said that he only knew the Barn and the Boobook Owls and did not correspond with anyone in Victoria at that time, although he answered some inquiries from A. G. Campbell about a year before and he had field experience. Articles in the *Emu* (RAOU publication) by Mr Mack of the National Museum, Melbourne, appeared at times but he doubted whether he was a field ornithologist, so he thought it best to try Mr Campbell. He hoped that the above answers would help Henry in his difficulties.

#### **Yet More on Swifts and a Mystery Bird**

Henry wrote the last letter in this correspondence file on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1932 from the same address as the last, thanking John for the information he had provided. He was pleased to relate that he had identified a male Stubble Quail when he heard the mystery call, stalked it and watched a bird rise with a whirr and land not far away in the fowl yard. He had been surprised to hear from John that swifts were so rarely reported or seen in SA, whereas they were usually seen every summer between Christmas and New Year in both Victoria and Tasmania. However he had first noticed them overhead on 10<sup>th</sup> December on a warm sunny day, (86°F, 30°C) and again on 11<sup>th</sup> December. He commented on John's doubt about Victorian and Tasmanian records, showing both swifts together in a flock, but that had been Henry's experience the summer before at Macedon. He wrote:

"The sky was hazy, becoming overcast and conditions very oppressive (86°)... The spinetails first turned up on December 30<sup>th</sup> 1931 and were noticed several days a week from then on. I was sleeping on a narrow open verandah, so had good opportunities of observing them. I was anxious to see forketails of which I had no previous experience so, every time swifts appeared, I observed them closely, often with field glasses. More than two months passed and I saw none but spinetails. Then, on 5<sup>th</sup> March, some swifts

Unfortunately the following biographical information about Henry Boss-Walker, the subject of Historical Series 2 and 3 was inadvertently omitted from the December 2002 Newsletter.

## ***Henry B. Boss-Walker – Biographical information***

Henry Beavor Boss-Walker was born in Hobart, Tasmania in October 1903 and he was the eldest son of six boys – Harry (as Henry was known to his family), Ian, Geoff, Hubert, Eric and Ken - their parents being Tom and Maude. His grandparent's migrated from the north of England to Tasmania and began an import export business. Harry's grandfather left the proceeds of the entire estate to Harry with the complete understanding of his brothers because of his invalid state. After early schooling in Hobart, Harry went as a boarder to Caulfield Grammar in Melbourne, where in 1921 he graduated dux of his class in his final year. He wished to become a medical missionary and began medicine at Melbourne University. In 1927 in his final year Harry was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and had to give it up. It was after this and because of a growing interest in bird watching that his correspondence (1930-32) with John Sutton, Secretary of the SAOA, began. He remained in Victoria until 1941 (even though the correspondence ended in 1932) as he thought the climate was more beneficial than in Tasmania. He married a Victorian lass Marjorie Sproule in 1941 and the couple returned to the family home in Hobart where they lived with his parents for the remainder of the war years. In 1946, they bought a house "St Chads" in Ferntree a bushy suburb on the slopes of Mt Wellington.

Michael Boss-Walker (nephew of Harry and son of the youngest brother Ken) remembers visiting this house as a schoolboy and helping feed the birds with handfuls of sugar and a sugar solution and standing perfectly still as the birds ate from his hands. He found it hard not to giggle when the birds settled on his head or walked along his bare arms. His uncle remained devoted to the birds in the

bush around the home and continued with his photography. There were no children of the marriage and Michael remembers Harry as being a pasty-faced elderly man in a rocking chair — on the verandah in fine weather — always in a dressing gown and pyjamas. However, at some stage his forthright mother declared that one either died of T.B. or got better, so it was decided that he should undergo tests — these showed no trace of active disease. He forthwith gave up his invalid life, began to dress normally and, as he got stronger, began to do some work for his next brother Ian who owned a manufacturing agency.

Harry joined the Field Naturalists Club in Hobart and became well known for his interest in and knowledge of birds, his photography and his ability to tame the birds in the bush surrounding his home. He was so successful that at one time the Governor of Tasmania, Lord Rowallan (Chief Scout) paid him a visit. [Lord Rowallan was Governor of Tasmania from November 1959 to March 1963.] One delightful story Michael related was the purchase of a small Austin car by Harry and Marjorie. Harry's sole function was to sit in the passenger seat and pull out the choke for Marjorie to hang her handbag there. In 1967 and just before the tragic bushfires around Hobart, which destroyed "St Chads", Harry and Marjorie sold their home in Ferntree and moved to Sandy Bay where they lived until their death, both in the 1970s.

I am indebted to Michael for supplying the information about Henry. He lives in Somerset near Burnie where he is the Harbour Master.

**Muriel Reid, November 2002**