

SAOA Historical Series No 32

Erhard Franz Boehm (1911-1994) 'An extraordinary amateur ornithologist'

Part 5

This instalment looks at various groups of birds recorded by Erhard Boehm in his notebooks or in published papers – namely Malleefowl, pigeons, cuckoos, swifts, kingfishers, bee-eaters, swallows, martins, trillers and cuckoo-shrikes. There are few mentions of the Malleefowl; with the first being a note that, although this species has been extinct in the Mt Mary district since 1885, old mounds can still be seen (Boehm 1929). Closer to the River Murray Erhard saw one among mallee and *triodia* west-south-west of Ramco in 1947, as well as several disused mounds. He was informed here that when pursued by dogs, Malleefowl will generally fly into a tree and refuse to be flushed. Presumably still talking about the Ramco area, he goes on to say that in the early 1930s when they were still in numbers, they would feed along the edge of wheat crops in the mornings and evenings. A neighbour, C.G. Reimann claimed to have seen a bird resembling a Malleefowl among thick mallee shoots a few miles north-west of Bower in about 1935.

In his earliest paper in the *SA Orn* (Boehm 1928), only three species of pigeon or dove are recorded for the period 1920-28 – several Peaceful Doves, the 'fairly common' Common Bronzewing and the common Crested Pigeon, with flocks of up to 40-50 birds seen in 1927. The revised ornithological notebooks add another species – the Diamond Dove – as well as some additional information about nesting, food and numbers. Of course the other species that appears in the later literature is the introduced Spotted Turtle-dove, but more of that species further on. Erhard believed that the paucity of records for the Diamond Dove, both in the Mt Mary Plains and the Murray River Valley, was due to them being visitors from further north. Records include one bird at Craigie's Lagoon in October 1941, one bird east of Sutherlands in February 1944 and one bird and three birds in Casuarina scrub west of Bower in October 1963. Peaceful Doves were also rare, with solitary birds occasionally seen on the Mt Mary Plains. There are also records from the River Murray – for example, 15 birds feeding on the seeds of *Onopordon acanthium* (Scotch thistle) at Brenda Park, Morgan, on 2/2/29 and 16 near Qualco on 27/5/78.

Presumably Common Bronzewings were encountered often enough not to warrant special mention in the daily notebooks, but there are references to their nesting, especially when they used the old nest of another species. In 1967, four nest were located in April/May, three with two eggs and the fourth in an old 'crow's' nest. In January 1947 Boehm found a Common Bronzewing brooding in a disused chough's nest 13 feet up in a mallee tree east of Sutherlands. A skin specimen from

Sutherlands in 1930 is in the Boehm collection in the SA Museum. Boehm reported that bronzewings fed on the seeds of *Geijera linearifolia* (sheepbush), *Heterodendron oleifolium* (now *Alectryon oleifolius*, bullock bush) and *Acacia oswaldii* (Oswald's wattle) and the perianths of *Enchylaena tomentosa* (ruby saltbush). During the peak of the drought in the winter of 1945, flocks of up to 40 birds daily came to feed at a spot where sheep had been fed with hay chaff near Bower.

As with the former species there are few mentions of Crested Pigeons in the daily diaries, but the Ornithological Revised Notebook does give nesting and feeding information. Erhard also published two papers, one on the habits of the Crested Pigeon (Boehm 1955b) and the other on banding results (Boehm 1972). Crested Pigeons established themselves on the Mt Mary Plains about the 1920s, while prior to this they had occurred along the Murray River, with Angas recording them at Moorundi in the 1840s. They feed on many kinds of seeds and wild fruits and eat spilled grain in cereal-growing areas. Boehm records them eating the fruits of two species of *Zygophyllum* (*ammophilum* and *ovatum*). Small flocks of up to 10 birds frequented the Erdora homestead during the drought of 1944-5 and fed with the fowls. They nest at any time of the year, with spring being the main breeding season. Banding of pigeons began in 1964 - mistnets were unsuccessful, as were drop nets, so maze traps were used and to 30 June 1972, 134 pigeons were banded, with 62 being retrapped 224 times. Only one bird was found any distance from the banding site - this bird had traveled about 10km. Nestlings and birds in the light-weight group, thought to be immature birds, were not usually retrapped and Boehm thought that immature Crested Pigeons soon leave their natal area. There is one skin in the Boehm collection, collected in September 1930 at Neales Flat.

Boehm noted in his Revised Ornithological Notebook that Spotted Turtle-Doves spread slowly, from the late 1930s, extending along the northern Mt Lofty Ranges, Barossa Valley and Murray River Valley. In 1961 he wrote in a notebook that several residents of the Greenock/Seppeltsfield area informed him that turtle-doves were established as a breeding species there and that some birds liberated by a Seppelt prior to World War II were believed to be the progenitors. Boehm (1961c) describes the occurrence of a single vagrant at Erdora on 4 October 1960; the adult male was collected and is now in the SA Museum. Another single bird was at Erdora on 12/10/78. In 1977 when visiting Qualco on the River Murray, Erhard was told that a turtledove had been there

for several months and was the only one ever seen there. A single bird was also seen at Eudunda on 19/2/79.

Despite only recording two species of cuckoo in his initial paper (Boehm 1928), five species occur on the Mt Mary Plains. In the Revised Ornithological Notes, Erhard stated that Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo is the common cuckoo on the Plains. The species was most frequent in the spring, but a few individuals may appear in any season of the year, including late summer and early autumn. Records come from many habitats, including the *Casuarina* scrubs and about the homestead, and from all areas, including the Murray River. In the other revised notebook he opines that they appear in the Sutherland district towards the end of August. However on perusal of the records in the daily notebooks from 1950 to 1976, the majority of those records come in late autumn and winter, the months of May through to August, with isolated sightings in spring and summer. On one occasion an immature bird seen in January was near a group of Variegated Fairy-wrens and on another occasion a bird was seen with a pair of White-fronted Chats.

In mid-July of 1969 Erhard writes that there were an unusually large number of cuckoos in the Bower area. For example, four Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoos were seen at one spot and a few days later more were seen on another property. Erhard put this down to an abundance of caterpillars on the *Bassia* and *Zygophyllum* bushes in the area. On the other hand in the winter and early spring of 1976 he described a scarcity of the species, not alleviated until after rains had brought on fresh growth on the shrubs and annuals and two were sighted west of Bower on 29/10/76.

Pallid Cuckoos were regularly reported but not common in most years on the Mt Mary Plains. Despite this statement in the Revised Ornithological Notes, there are as many Pallid Cuckoo records as for the previous species in the daily diaries, and as for that species, most are from the late autumn and winter months. A record in 1953 on 6th June states that this is the first for the season. Many records are of single birds, but occasionally two or more birds are sighted together. A juvenile was noted in November 1971 and two young birds on 15/7/69. In 1950, when there were three Pallid Cuckoos about the homestead, a bird was heard singing at 11.20pm in moonlight after showers. Two specimens of the Pallid Cuckoo from Sutherlands are represented in the skin collection, including a bird that was found dead on 10/5/28 caught by its wing on a barbed wire fence.

The Revised Ornithological Notes tell us that Black-eared Cuckoos are most often seen in thick scrub where Redthroats are found and breed, to the west of Bower on the Mt Mary Plains. This is certainly borne out by the daily diaries, with most records coming from this area, with the added description that they are often found in *Casuarina* scrubs, and sometimes near Mount Mary. There are fewer records for this species than for the two

cuckoos above, and the majority of records are from July to September, with a few juveniles being found in October and November. Two skins are in the Boehm collection, both from near Bower and one, a juvenile bird being fed by Redthroats, was collected on 2/11/77. The notebooks also record a specimen of a female being collected west of Bower on 12/8/28, but this is not in the collection.

The other two cuckoos were rare on the Mt Mary Plains. The first Fan-tailed Cuckoo recorded on the Mt Mary Plains was seen by Boehm and Brian Glover – one bird was in *Casuarina* scrub near Eba on 12th September 1954. There are only four other records from the district in the 60 years that Erhard spent bird-watching at Sutherlands. On 23/4/60 a solitary bird was seen along a tree-lined road 2.5 miles east of Sutherlands and another bird appeared at Erdora in drizzling rain on 30th July 1964. This bird was seen daily for about a week and was seen to feed on caterpillars (Boehm 1965b). On the occasion already mentioned in mid-July 1969 when cuckoos were unusually abundant in the Bower area, a pair of Fan-tailed Cuckoos was seen on 13th July, when there was also an abundance of caterpillars on the *Bassia* and *Zygophyllum* bushes. The last record was of a single bird at Erdora homestead sitting on a fence post again in drizzling rain on 21/6/65.

Probably the rarest of the cuckoos in this region was the Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, with the first confirmed record being an individual caught in a mistnet in the black oak block west of Bower on 2nd September 1971. A bird believed to be this species was seen and heard in the same locality in September 1963 and Erhard believed that the favourable conditions in these years may have explained the presence of this species in the arid interior (Boehm 1974). There was another unconfirmed sighting of this species in black oak scrub 5km west of Bower on 1st September 1974. One striking feature of all these sightings is that all were in September.

Erhard appears to have been fascinated by swifts, writing an article about them apparently about the time of his first sighting of Fork-tailed Swifts in the Sutherlands region (Boehm 1939). In this paper he summarised the information of other authors on the species' habits. A later paper adds other observations in South Australia, including one of his own that eclipsed the latest seasonal occurrence at that time (Boehm 1944). This was a reference to his three sightings in April 1941 of 180, 30 and 50 birds. The earliest Boehm record I can find is a specimen taken on 9th December 1938, with later sightings in many years from 1941 to 1972. Most were of 100 birds or less, but 1000 were reported in February of 1971. Another specimen was secured from a flock that was coming to within 3 feet of the ground near the homestead on 9th April 1961. Generally Erhard remarked on the sultry unsettled weather that accompanied the swifts. He published a third paper on their world-wide distribution and breeding biology, in which he marvelled

at their length of wing and width of gape that so precisely matched their migratory and aerial way of life (Boehm 1962).

None of the kingfisher group was common on the Mt Mary Plains; of the three species, only the Red-backed Kingfisher was fairly regularly reported, but still considered uncommon. The Revised Ornithological Notes state that they occasionally bred in the banks of creeks near Sutherlands from 1920 to 1948, suggesting that this behaviour ceased after this time. The species was probably sufficiently rare for Boehm to note most occurrences in the daily diaries. There must have been an element of seasonality in his records, as he remarks that a single bird seen on 19th September 1949 was a very early record for spring and again, that birds seen on 4th September 1952 and 23rd September 1956, were the first for the season. Other records were singletons in the spring of 1946, 1948, 1950 and 1953. Several pairs were sighted near Sutherlands in October 1953 and a rare summer record was one bird on 17th February 1955 in the *Casuarina* scrub west of Bower. This species was also recorded along the Murray River. On one occasion in 1953, a kingfisher was seen with a 'copper-tailed skink' in its bill. There are two specimens of the Red-backed Kingfisher in the SA Museum – one was collected on 9/11/34 and the other, a male, from east of Sutherlands on 26/9/1960.

By contrast the Sacred Kingfisher is summarised as a very rare visitor to the Mt Mary Plains and probably transient. I can locate only two records for this species in the notebooks and only one away from the Murray River. A solitary bird was seen in black oak scrub near Bower on 23rd September 1956. The other record was from Bryants Creek near Morgan on 15/11/53. Laughing Kookaburras were also regarded as irregular on the Plains and not known to stay long. Boehm considered that they were most likely visitors from the River Murray Valley and possibly immature and/or unattached birds. The only records were one bird at Sutherlands, probably in 1929 (Boehm 1929); one seen by V. Byrne in the Sutherlands Recreation Reserve in August 1928; one seen several times near Sutherlands in September 1939; one near the Recreation Reserve on 26/9/44 seen by R.D. Bannear; and several birds heard calling along Burra Creek near Worlds End on 6/10/46.

The Rainbow Bee-eater appears in the original list of Sutherland birds (Boehm 1928), and is described there as common in the summer and a breeding species. The species was migratory, as two birds at Erdora on 1st October 1970 were described as the first seen since the previous summer. All records come from the period from October to January, with one outlier in March 1954 from near Morgan. Numbers varied from solitary individuals to small flocks of up to six birds. No details of nesting are given, although some records are from Salt Creek and Deep Creek near Sutherlands and Burra and Bryants Creek along the Murray River, so may indicate nesting

localities in creek banks. Erhard noted that bee-eaters sometimes fly out to grazing flocks of sheep to snatch grasshoppers disturbed by their movements. Most of the records in the daily diaries come from the late 1940s and early 1950s but this may reflect the more cursory recording in the 1960s and 70s. The only specimen in the SA Museum is a bird taken at Sutherlands on 21/11/29.

Boehm has some very interesting observations on the fluctuating fortunes of the two species of swallows occurring regularly in South Australia. In his paper on the perching birds of the Mt Mary Plains, he describes Welcome Swallows as occurring in pairs or small flocks at homesteads and townships (Boehm 1957). He believed that this species had probably become more common through closer settlement from 1900 on, as mud from dams became more available for nest construction and the numbers of insects increased with the greater availability of water. However a later paper (Boehm 1961d) hypothesises that Welcome Swallow numbers later declined from the mid-1940s in this area due to the considerable reduction in the number of horses, through farmers abandoning wheat-growing or leaving the area. Horse stables, pig-sties and cow sheds were all breeding grounds for stable flies and their sharp decline would have decreased the food supply for the swallows.

In June 1945 Erhard saw a flock of 5-22 Welcome Swallows flying about an old underground tank which had been used as a burial ground for dead sheep. The birds generally flew low over the shallow covering of soil over the carcasses and some then settled on the soil. He thought that they were feeding on flies emerging from the soil. Thereafter numbers of swallows in the daily diaries were four or less (apart from much larger numbers along the River Murray), leading him to note the unusually large number of ten birds in a flock on 3/2/62. The other noteworthy comment he makes about their activities was the actions of four birds that flew in and out of manhole of a 1000 gallon galvanised iron tank at the homestead over several days at the end of July and early August of 1953. There is one skin in the Boehm collection. Boehm (1957) notes that some swallows nested in hollow trees, with the nests being the usual mud structures lined with feathers.

The same paper (Boehm 1957) describes the White-backed Swallow as irregular in its incidence. In the spring of some years it appears and breeds in tunnels constructed in the banks of creeks or gravel pits. This breeding activity only occurred during the period from 1920 to 1942, generally in the Deep and Salt Creeks, according to the Revised Ornithological Notes. Some data for nesting include 5 eggs in a burrow in November 1931 and 4 eggs in October 1934. From the mid-1940s the species was rarely seen, in fact 3 birds flying near Erdora on 9/1/55 were the first seen in the district for nearly three years. One bird was noted at Bryants Creek (River Murray) on 15/11/53 and there were subsequently a few more sporadic records from near Erdora – two birds flying over a dam on 28/10/74, a pair near Boehm's Creek during December 1974-January 1976, two birds on 14/2/76 and

four birds sitting on a fence on 20/2/76. Erhard surmised that their decline coincided with the decline in cereal production and soil cultivation.

As with this species in many parts of South Australia, the Tree Martin was more numerous in spring and summer than in the winter on the Mt Mary Plains (Boehm 1957). There are occasional records in the daily diaries, with numbers ranging from one bird to thirty-six birds. The only specimen in the SA Museum is a set of three eggs taken at Sutherlands on 28/11/31. Boehm (1957) alludes to their habit of coming to ground to pick up single mallee leaves for their nesting hollows and to the rare occurrence of hollow entrances made smaller with mud. Flocks sometimes congregated over dams, possibly to feed on mosquitoes. Contrary to the regular sighting of Tree Martins was the irregular nature of the Fairy Martin, which appeared and bred in colonies in only a few years (Boehm 1957). Nests were built near temporary waterholes and under the banks of creeks. I can locate only one record in the notebooks, that of nine Fairy Martin eggs taken from several nests along the Deep Creek, south of Sutherlands on 25th September 1932. Two Fairy Martin skins are in the Boehm Collection, from November 1930. The lack of any records from after the publication date of the 1957 paper suggests that this species was not seen in the later years at Sutherlands.

White-winged Trillers were also irregular in occurrence, but were numerous in some seasons (Boehm 1957). As borne out by the daily diaries, some birds arrived as early as early July, often birds that appeared to be males in eclipse plumage. All records fall within the period from July to March, with a nest and two eggs reported on 25th August 1946. The largest agglomeration was 12 male birds and two females in early October 1960 in the Bower district. The species was recorded in the spring of 1945, 1946, 1953, 1954, 1960 and 1978, but was noted as very rare in the spring/summer of 1977-78. A female specimen was taken on 14/10/60 at Sutherlands.

Boehm (1928) reported that the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike was common in summer and bred in the district; this was later corrected to the species occurring at any time of the year (Boehm 1957). There are few occurrences documented in the daily diaries, in keeping with its common status. Erhard did note that they sometimes hovered over shrubs like saltbush and bluebush when in search of food. At times largish numbers were seen together, e.g. nine were hovering amongst shrubs in August 1955, 10 birds were in sugar gums at a deserted homestead in June 1964 and he mistnetted seven in regrowth mallee in May 1976. Most eggs were found in September and October but a large nestling was found on 5th January 1948 (Boehm 1957). A more typical nesting was from September 1932 when a nest with three eggs was found on a horizontal bough, 13 feet up in a mallee and made of bassia twigs and spider webs.

The other cuckoo-shrike found in the district obviously fascinated Erhard as he made many notes on the Ground Cuckoo-shrike. Boehm (1957) described this species as

rare and probably nomadic, as it was recorded in all seasons of the year. His first record was of four birds 6km east of Sutherlands (Boehm 1983). One was collected as a specimen and sent to Edwin Ashby in exchange for a skin from South America. This species was again seen near Sutherlands during May, June, July and August 1938, when their calls were described as "reminiscent of fairly big chickens' plaintive notes". Two birds were recorded near Sutherlands in July 1940 and seven on 30/11/40. There are quite a few records between 1946 and 1956 and Boehm (1983) believed that they had become more common. The largest flock noted was nine birds (in 1948 and 1951), but more generally one or two birds were seen. Later records come more sporadically from 1971 (Erdora) and 1979 (White Dam Conservation Park), but this may have been due to less regular note-taking. However it may also reflect a decrease in their abundance.

Only two nests were reported, the first being found near Sutherlands on 12th November 1955, 17 feet from the ground in a mallee. The nest was constructed of *Bassia* stems and twigs and sheep wool and contained two young about a fortnight old. In October 1956 a nest was built in the same tree and situation but was blown down by strong winds. Then another nest was built in the fork of a nearby tree and by November 3rd it contained three eggs. The nest was built of thin sticks and twigs of *Bassia*, bound with a large quantity of wool and cobwebs, and lined with white and black feathers. A tail of material hung from the bottom. On 9th December young were seen on the nest and an adult bird flew about in the vicinity. The first young left the nest on 18th December and the remaining two on 20th December (Boehm 1957).

Errata for No. 31: Page I, para 2, line 2 — this should read 'Galah (not very common and breed)' rather than 'Galah (not a very common breed)'

Penny Paton