

SAOA Historical Series No 33

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

Part 6

Part 6 continues the documentation of groups of birds recorded by EF Boehm on the Mount Mary Plains as well as providing a map of the region (thank goodness I hear some of you say!) to help pinpoint his sightings. The birds concerned are the larks, reed warbler, grassbird, flycatchers, whistlers, shrike-thrush, bellbird, quail-thrush and babblers.

Richard's Pipit (then called just Pipit) was regarded as "very common" in Boehm's (1928) first list of birds in the Sutherlands and Mount Mary district from observations from 1920-28. A later article (Boehm 1957) added that they were common in open paddocks and had increased greatly since European settlement. They sometimes congregated in large numbers in a paddock and in December 1953, when the temperature reached 103^oF, about 20 birds drank from and ran about on the damp soil of the homestead dam. They bred as early as August in good years (for example 1937), and after severe drought bred in the summer and autumn. Boehm published a short note on pipits in *Emu* (1957b), pointing out that, contrary to the literature, pipits do sometimes sit on fence posts and at the tops of trees and sing. There are 4 pipit skins in the SA Museum from near Sutherlands, three from 1932 and one from 1979.

The two songlarks were both recorded from the Mount Mary area, although only the Brown Songlark was on the original list of birds observed from 1920-28 (Boehm 1928), and regarded as generally common in good seasons, as well as breeding. Occasional birds were also present in the autumn and early winter on the Mount Mary Plains and eggs found in September and October (Boehm 1957). The first record of the Rufous Songlark was two pairs on 8/10/30 in a gully between Sutherlands and Bower. Between September and November 1931 and 1932, these birds were numerous and several nests were found (Boehm 1934). Rufous Songlarks were again common in 1937, with many birds being seen in October and several nests found. Birds usually appeared in mid-August of most years, but there are also records of birds singing in June and July (for example, in 1946, 1953 and 1973). Eggs were found in September and October, with three eggs being the usual clutch (Boehm 1957).

There is one skin in the SA Museum from October 1941 and two clutches of eggs, from September 1931 and 1932.

The rather cryptic Horsfield's Bushlark was first noted in 1928 (Boehm 1929); however Boehm (1934) claims that the first authentic record was a specimen collected on 16/9/32. This specimen does not seem to be in the SA Museum. Boehm (1957) considered the bushlark to be an uncommon non-breeding species, with most sightings in cereal crops. A comment in one of the notebooks suggested that the species had declined since the 1950s, which was about the time cropping became less common in the Sutherlands district. Sightings from the notebooks were in May 1944, May 1945, December 1947, August 1954 and June 1977. Another lark that could possibly occur on the Mount Mary Plains, the introduced Skylark, was never recorded by Boehm, even in good seasons, as he takes pains to record in his Revised Ornithological Notebook.

Boehm regarded both the Little Grassbird and Clamorous Reed-Warbler as rare vagrants on the Mount Mary Plains. The first record of the latter species was a report by R. Schodde and R.M. Gibbs of a bird close to a dam several miles north-west of Bower in August 1954 (Boehm 1957). Erhard's first record was of a single bird that remained all day in shrubs and trees around the Erdora homestead on 2nd September 1974. He also trapped an immature bird in a mistnet in regrowth mallee far from water, 5km NE of Sutherlands on 20 October 1974. His last record was from dense foliage of trees and bamboo clumps in Eudunda on 23/10/1978. There are even fewer records of the Little Grassbird, with Boehm's first record being of a pair in a boxthorn hedge and shrubbery near a dam at Erdora on 13th and 14th September 1951 (Boehm 1953a). The only other record is of three birds at Robertstown Lagoon on 12/7/55 among lignum bushes.

The first published record of a Scarlet Robin was a pair seen in May 1928 (Boehm 1928). Boehm (1934) reported six Scarlet Robins in a gully between Sutherlands and Bower on 29/6/30, with three birds being adult males. This was atypical as most other records were of one or two birds, and he regarded this species as a rare vagrant from the

ranges to the west (Boehm 1957). All records were in autumn and winter (for example June and July 1942, May 1943 and April 1955), including a specimen from 21 July 1942. The Red-capped Robin was also regarded as rare in 1928, but it was a resident species and bred in the district. Subsequent records seem to support this summary, with just a few records in the notebooks. Boehm (1957) wrote that in the winter the male birds come out of the thick scrub where they breed and they are more easily seen than on fences and at homesteads. Nests were found fairly regularly, often in mallee trees and made from grass stems, bound with cobwebs and lined with wool and feathers. Greenish-brown lichen decorated the rim of the nests. There is one specimen of the Red-capped Robin in the SA Museum, collected on 2 April 1932.

Unlike the two red-chested robins, the Hooded Robin was regarded as fairly common from the observations of 1920-28 (Boehm 1928). This view was reinforced in Boehm (1957) where he attested that it was the common robin of the area, being found in all the large patches of scrub. Nests were constructed either in forks or on hollow stubs from grass and rootlets, bound with cobwebs and lined with rabbit fur, wool, feathers or hair. Sometimes the rim of the nest was decorated with bark strips and two eggs seemed to be the usual clutch. Like the former species, the Jacky Winter was found in all large patches of scrub, but also occurred sometimes along tree-lined roads (Boehm 1957). Nests were recorded in October and November, with juveniles being found in January and March. A short note in *Emu* described how Jacky Winters will on occasion sing beautifully at a height of 400-500 feet from the ground over paddocks (Boehm 1956). Four specimens from near Sutherlands from 1978 and 1982 are in the South Australian Museum.

The Southern Scrub-robin was regarded initially as very rare (Boehm 1928), but the comment in Boehm (1957) that this species had declined considerably in numbers and distribution leads me to conclude that his initial assessment was incorrect. This is borne out in the Revised Ornithological Notes, where he relates that where one could once see six to eight scrub-robins in geijera and false sandalwood scrub west of Bower, by the 1960s there was only one individual left. By this time Boehm considered that the species was almost extinct on the Mount Mary Plains. Occasionally individuals sing while perched high on the top of a tree; one record of a bird singing at 20 feet from the ground was in September 1946 so may have been of a breeding bird.

Boehm initially reports the Gilbert's Whistler as a very rare breeding bird on the Mount Mary Plains

(Boehm 1928). A pair was observed in the company of a pair of Golden Whistlers in mallee scrub west of Bower on 24th May 1939, two males were seen 5 miles NW of Bower on 22nd November 1953 and a single male was recorded in a geijera 4 miles S of Bower on 13/12/1953. In June 1965 an adult female was banded 3.5 miles W of Bower and a female banded by R.M. Gibbs in August 1963 was retrapped on 28th May 1967, 3.5 miles SW of Bower. Of the specimens in the SA Museum, one is a clutch of two eggs from Woods Flat on the River Murray (30/7/28) and two are specimens from Portee Station, 2 miles E of Sandleton (October 1933), so not on the Mount Mary Plains. Boehm (1957) described Gilbert's Whistler as a localized species, found generally in thick scrub with many tall shrubs like geijera and he believed that their numbers had decreased through clearance and thinning of habitat. An entry in one of the notebooks indicates that until the 1950s most blocks of scrub with geijera, exocarpos and grey broom (*Eremophila scoparia*) supported a small population, but that they had declined markedly since that date.

Golden Whistlers were not recorded prior to 1934 (Boehm 1928, 1934), and are described as "the rarest of the genus here, and not known to breed" (Boehm 1957). I can only find four records in the notebooks: the pair referred to above, on 24/5/1939; a probable adult female banded in 1966 (probably in April); an adult pair 5km NE of Sutherlands in regrowth mallee in April 1977; and two birds, one an adult male, 5km W of Bower in May 1977. There are a number of specimens collected from the Bower/Sutherlands district, between 1929 and 1978, from April, May, July and September. It is interesting that most records come from autumn/winter, when some individuals are known to move seasonally and in some parts of Australia into more open habitats (Higgins and Peter 2002, pp1105-6).

The third whistler recorded by Boehm was the Rufous, which he described as rare and non-breeding (Boehm 1928); a later assessment (Boehm 1957) described it as the most numerous of the whistlers, nomadic, non-breeding and generally observed in pairs. There are few records in the notebooks: a pair was seen in tall mallee scrub east of Sutherlands on 24/7/1946; and adult male, accompanied by a striped bird that may have been an immature, was 2 miles SW of Sutherlands on 10/1/1954; a pair were in casuarinas scrub 5 km W of Bower on 10/10/1977; small numbers of Rufous Whistlers, including an adult male, were observed in Bower and Sutherlands during autumn 1978; and there was an adult male at Erdora on 14/4/1979.

There are two skins from Sutherlands in the SA Museum, a male and a female from August 1929 and July 1930.

Described as common (Boehm 1928) and occurring in all large patches of scrub (Boehm 1957), the Grey Shrike-thrush appears to have interested Erhard predominantly because of the bolder markings of juveniles. He also noted that their clutches of 2-3 eggs were always found in September and October. Also described as common, at least initially (Boehm 1928) was the Crested Bellbird. A later reappraisal described them as "in limited numbers in all the large patches of scrub with tall shrubs and mallee shoots" (Boehm 1957). In the Revised Ornithological Notes, the species was deemed to have disappeared from much of the western portion of the Mount Mary Plains, possibly due to the degradation of the environment. There are several species that Boehm noted were to be found in all the large patches of scrub, and as these patches disappeared or became smaller (as we see from today's landscape), these birds must also have declined or disappeared from these areas. All nests found were close to the ground (between 2.5 and 4 feet) and usually were placed in the hollow stub of a bush. Boehm (1957) described the typical nest as being built of twigs and lined with bark strips, rootlets and a few pieces of the golden-brown silk from the nests of the tent caterpillars. I find it interesting that he did not seem to report the decoration of nests with the hairy caterpillars themselves as this is widely recorded in the literature (Higgins and Peter 2002, p. 1069). Only one skin is in the SA Museum, from Sutherlands from 5/3/1931. There is contradictory information about the Willie Wagtail that was initially determined to be numerous (Boehm 1928); but a later article (Boehm 1957) conceded that it was not very numerous, but had probably not altered its status over the years – i.e. unlike a lot of birds that had either become less or more common, this species' status was unchanged. The species was equally at home around homesteads and in the scrub and on one occasion Boehm watched a Willie Wagtail successfully avoid several strikes by an Australian Hobby as it flew across open grassland (Boehm 1957). He also described an occasion where a Willie Wagtail flew gradually upwards to a height of at least 250 feet, apparently catching insects and he considered it not unusual for them to forage up to 100 feet (Boehm 1962b). Grey Fantails visited the Mount Mary Plains, mainly in the autumn and winter months, did not breed and were often seen singly, although pairs of birds were not unknown.

A conspicuous bird, the Restless Flycatcher, was described as "very rare" by the teenage birdwatcher (Boehm 1928); the entry in Boehm (1957) regarded it as rarer than the Willie Wagtail; and the Revised Ornithological Notes suggested that this once frequent species had become less common during the 1970s and 1980s. Several nests were found, ranging from 9 feet to 14 feet above the ground; one nest contained 4 eggs and another was decorated with the green feathers of the Budgerigar (Boehm 1957).

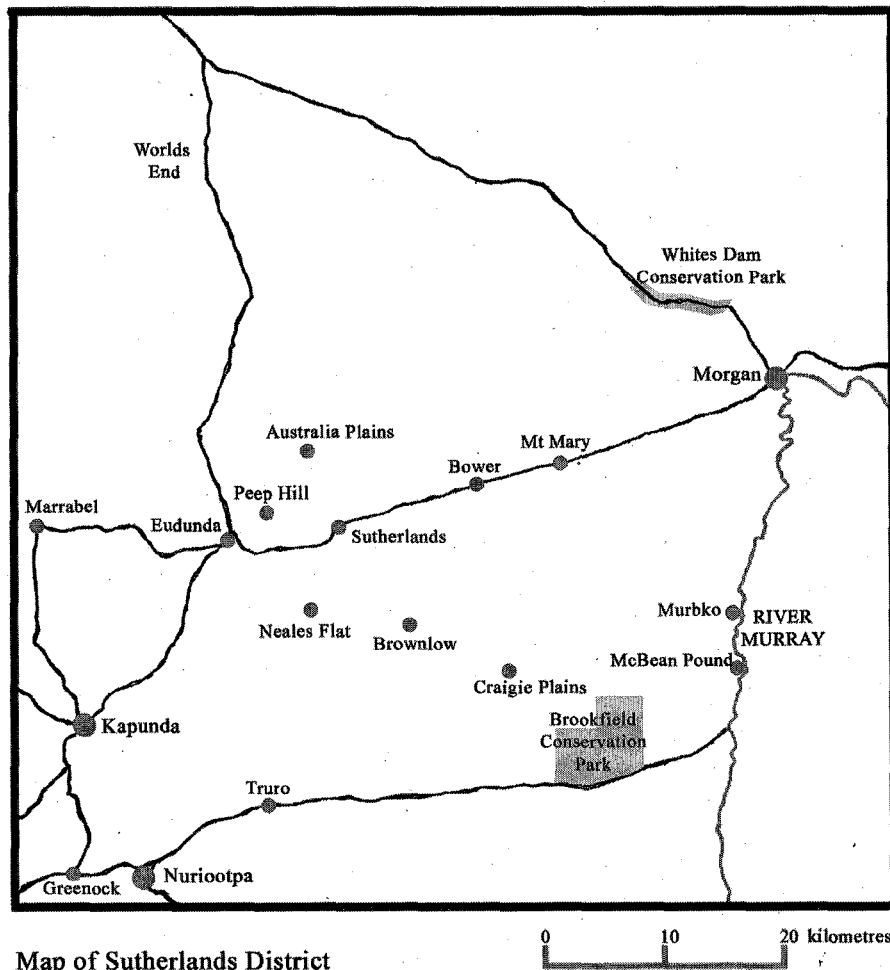
From recording between 1920 and 1928, Boehm (1928) deduced that the Chestnut Quail-thrush was rare, but his later summary (Boehm 1957) suggested that they were once continuously distributed and in reasonable numbers before extensive clearing and thinning of the scrub. By this time they had declined but could still be found in scrub with an understorey of shrubs or mallee shoots as far west as the foothills of the Mount Lofty Ranges. However by the 1970s, when Erhard was writing his Revised Ornithological Notes, the decline had continued so that even in the central portion of the Mount Mary Plains there were few patches of scrub with quail-thrush. In 1971 quail-thrush had not been seen for many months in the regrowth mallee block (Section 169, Brownlow), when on 11/11/71 an adult and a juvenile were seen in a strip cut for mist-netting in 1967-68, which was attracting some bird-life. Later in that decade, after many unsuccessful attempts to find quail-thrush in the Thiele block of regrowth mallee, 5 km NE of Sutherlands, an adult female was observed on 6/7/1979.

Quite a few quail-thrush nests were found in the early years, constructed of bark, and set in a depression, often under a zygodophyllum bush. There are 3 sets of 2 eggs in the SA Museum, from October 1931 and 1946 and from July 1944. Other nests with 2 eggs were found on 23/8/1943 and 22/9/58, with an unusually large clutch of 3 eggs being discovered on 30/8/1973. However on 25/9/73 there were only two chicks in the nest. Erhard took issue with a paper published by Condon in 1962 in which he said that quail-thrushes were not songsters. In Erhard's opinion, the males often sang a distinctive song in late winter and spring, presumably a territorial advertisement (Boehm 1964). An article in *Corella* on banding the Chestnut Quail-thrush over 16 years on the Mount Mary Plains reported that more males than females were trapped, agreeing with the author's impressions during field work (Boehm 1981).

Of the two babblers, only the White-browed was recorded before 1928 (Boehm 1928); however Boehm (1934) reports that several Chestnut-

crowned Babbler nests with eggs were found in the early 1930s. A later assessment concluded that the White-browed was more widely distributed, but that there were more individuals of the Chestnut-crowned in the district (Boehm 1957). The nests of the Chestnut-crowned were large (one weighed in at 6 lb) and were often situated higher from the ground than those of the other species. There is a long description of the 'playgrounds' of the Chestnut-crowned Babbler (Boehm 1957), in which birds play follow the leader and make well-defined paths in and around bushes. This trait was written up in *Emu*

prefer tall thick mallee with undergrowth and dense, medium height regrowth mallee. Twenty-five percent of Chestnut-crowned Babbler caught were retraps at or near the original banding station, apart from one bird that had moved five kilometers. Erhard believed that some immature birds remained with the natal group, at least for a year or two, but that others dispersed to neighbouring groups. Boehm also believed that in the non-breeding season flocks sometimes coalesced with neighbouring flocks and that in times of drought whole flocks might desert a particular locality. This belief was supported by his



Map of Sutherlands District

(Boehm 1955c), with a description of a playground near Bower in casuarina scrub around a *Rhagodia spinescens* bush.

A paper on the banding of 329 Chestnut-crowned Babbler between 1963 and 1974 describes how this species occurs in fairly open scrub consisting of old regrowth mallee, often with little undergrowth, and in very open scrub with few tall trees where there is a dense stratum of large shrubs like geijera, hop bush and spiny wattle *Acacia colletioides* (Boehm 1974b). On the other hand White-browed Babbler

lack of sighting of the species at White Dam Conservation Park in three visits during winter 1977, despite many old nests being present (Notebook 4). Eggs of the Chestnut-crowned Babbler were found in September and October and there are three clutches of eggs in the SA Museum from Sutherlands in 1932, 1933 and 1946. There are also three skins: 30/3/1932 (Bower), 2/6/1941 (Sutherlands) and 19/9/1978 (3 km E of Sutherlands).

Penny Paton