

# *SAOA Historical Series No 34*

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

## *Part 7*

In Part 7 we examine the chats, gibber bird, weebill, thornbills, whiteface, redthroat, heathwren, fieldwren, wrens and woodswallows recorded by EF Boehm on the Mount Mary Plains. The White-fronted Chat was the most resident chat of the three species recorded, with birds present in varying numbers except in times of severe drought (Boehm 1957). The largest flock that I could find reference to was 90 on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1938 and Erhard noted that the birds sometimes follow the plough to search for food among the freshly-turned lumps of earth. A flock of 70 immature birds appeared to be feeding on insects in tall green mustard (London Rocket) about the homestead in the early spring of 1969. Breeding begins as early as July in some seasons, and the nests are usually situated less than 50cm from ground. There is one specimen in the Boehm collection in the SA Museum, from Hansborough (between Eudunda and Kapunda) on 5/10/63.

Unlike the former species the Crimson Chat is an irregular migrant, appearing in spring in certain years and disappearing by mid-summer (Boehm 1957). In a few years it was very common with every patch of scrub with suitable undergrowth having a breeding population. Nests are built 15-40cm from the ground of rootlets and are lined with finer rootlets, bark fibres and sometimes wool. In good seasons the sets of 3-4 eggs can be found as early as September. They put in an appearance in 1930 and 1931 between October and December, with several nests being found in bluebush and Australian boxthorn. A few pairs were about in spring 1960, 1963 and 1968 and a late record was a probable pair in late April 1969 in the Bower block, with the male in eclipse plumage. Two birds were collected in 1930 and 1960, as well as a clutch of eggs on 8/9/46. Like the Crimson Chat, the Orange Chat is irregular in occurrence, being relatively numerous in the spring of 1937 and 1940, and with nesting occurring in October (Boehm 1957). The nests were in bindyi bushes in open paddocks and contained 3 eggs. A

few birds were also seen with White-fronted Chats in May 1933 (Boehm 1934) and June 1951, with a note that a pair at Erdora in the heat of the day on 18/1/73 were the first seen for many months.

I can only locate two records of the Gibberbird – a pair was collected on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1942 half a mile from Sutherlands. They were on limestone fallow land which had not been cultivated for 25 years and was being ploughed. The birds were searching for food in the depressions made by the horses' hoofs and were often in the company of Richard's Pipits (Boehm 1943). Interestingly the SA Museum records give 21/7/42 as the collection date, but this is more likely to be the accession date. Another bird of this species was seen on a bare patch of ground on 22/8/42 (Boehm 1957) and these birds represented at the time the most southerly records for the state.

The Weebill was listed as very common in Boehm's first publication on the birds of his region (Boehm 1928) and further as probably the most numerous native bird species in the area (Boehm 1957). He calculated that there were at least 5000 and perhaps 7000 on the Mt Mary Plains and their abundance may explain the paucity of records in the notebooks. Nests are built in the drooping mallee branchlets and may be as low as 76cm from the ground. They are constructed of grass, medic stems, wool and cobwebs, with the lining being of wool or feather, or both. One nest near Sutherlands in 1939 contained the feathers from Galah, magpie and Red-rumped Parrot. The SA Museum holds 2 skins, a skeleton and a clutch of eggs in the Boehm collection.

Four species of thornbill occur on the Mt Mary Plains, with the Yellow being the rarest. The species occurs in mallee (*E.oleosa* and *E.odorata*) and callitris pine on the foothills on the western boundary of the area, rarely wandering eastwards along the creeks and water-courses to near Sutherlands (Boehm 1957). A few birds were seen along Deep Creek in 1934 and 6 were in a mallee

shoot 2 miles east of Sutherlands on 28/11/39. Four to six were in mallee south-west of Sutherlands on 4/5/57 and 4 were in flowering mallee (*Eucalyptus brachycalyx*) SSW of Sutherlands in early January 1977. Boehm observed that they were often in the company of Weebills and Yellow-rumped Thornbills. There are no records of the species breeding in the area. Two skins from Sutherlands are in the SA Museum, collected in December 1930 and on 4/5/57.

Boehm believed that the Inland Thornbill declined considerably in the 25 years to 1957 and so became rarer than the Redthroat. At one time it was found in virgin tall mallee with thick undergrowth as far west as Sutherlands (in areas with less than 10 inches of rain), but by the late 1950s small numbers were restricted to a few patches of black oak scrub in the Mt Mary and Eba portion of the region (Boehm 1957). The decline appeared to be due to widespread destruction of suitable habitat, ie domestic livestock browsing had destroyed the undergrowth critical for this species. A record of a lone bird in geijera scrub 5km SW of Bower on 23/7/78 was the first seen there for 40 years. Another bird was secured and banded 4 miles west of Bower on 13/5/70 in an area where the species had not been seen previously. Inland and Chestnut-rumped Thornbills fed in association with each other. One of the Inland Thornbill's loud scolding calls has a strong resemblance to the scolding notes of the male Redthroat.

Described as widespread and the common thornbill of the drier eastern parts of the Mt Mary Plains, the Chestnut-rumped Thornbill was probably as numerous as the Yellow-rumped (Boehm 1957). Due to its abundance little is written about this species in the notebooks. Two skins and a set of eggs from the 1930s are in the SA Museum and a fledgeling Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo was found in a nest of this species.

Generally found in pairs or family groups, the Yellow-rumped Thornbill could occur in flocks of up to 12 birds in autumn (Boehm 1957). Eggs are commonly found in early spring but, following the breaking of drought, the species can breed in autumn; e.g. a fledgling was found near Sutherlands on 31/5/41. Erhard believed that this species was less frequent in the 1950s than it had

been in the period from 1920-45 when more suitable habitat was available.

The Southern Whiteface was regarded as numerous and apparently holding its own (Boehm 1957) and one of the most common species of the Mt Mary Plains (Boehm 1970). Whitefaces were generally found in open areas with scattered shrubs and often around farms. During temporary or protracted drought, the birds tended to congregate in favoured feeding places such as gullies and flats with thickets of shrubs (e.g. as occurred during autumn 1970) or in small flocks along fences and roads (Boehm 1970). The largest agglomeration of birds was a very large flock of about 50 birds 3 miles west of Bower on 9/7/70. The banding of 271 birds in the mid 1960s showed that whitefaces did not move long distances (3 miles was the longest movement), but that there is more movement among the local communities than cursory observation would suggest. Breeding occurs in September and October, with a clutch size of 3 or 4 eggs being laid in nests in hollow trees and fence posts (Boehm 1957).

Not recorded until 1934, the Redthroat appears to have been a special bird for Erhard, as his notebooks report many sightings and observations. This rare and localized species was generally found in black oak, geijera and bluebush scrub and declined in the 1930s and 1940s due to habitat destruction, particularly the browsing of the undergrowth by livestock (Boehm 1957). Boehm thought that the ground-feeding actions of the Redthroat resembled those of a thornbill or a scrub-wren but that the flight was more like a heathwren. The males sing attractively during the breeding season but less often at other times, with the song being reminiscent of a Horsfield's Bushlark and a heathwren. Nests were found in October, November and early December, in shrubs low to the ground. A clutch of eggs and 2 specimens are in the SA Museum.

I have reported each sighting from the notebooks, as they may be the sum total of records, at least from the 1950s. The first record was a single bird about 5 miles NE of Sutherlands on 30/6/33. Eight birds were in bluebush amongst casuarina scrub 3 miles NE of Mt Mary on 4/5/52, 10 were in the same locality on 12/4/53 and three lone birds on 20/5/53. One bird was singing 6 miles NW of

Bower in casuarina scrub with bluebush understorey on 9/8/53 and again on 23/8/53. Four birds were seen here on 11/10/53 and on 31/10/53 a pair was among *Scaevola spinescens* (spiny fanflower) and *Acacia colletioides* (wait-a-while) and the male was singing. Five birds were 8 miles NW of Bower on 21/5/53 in scrub of false sandalwood, mallee, geijera, bluebush and *Scaevola spinescens*. A pair in casuarina scrub in Section 9 Hd of Bower on 23/8/53 were the first seen in this location for twenty years. They were again sighted on 20/9/53 and gave signs of breeding. Two pairs and 2 single birds were in casuarina scrub east of Mt Mary on 10/1/54, one was in mallee and bluebush in Section 9 Hd of Bower on 6/4/54 and a pair were in geijera and bluebush in Section 9 on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April 1954. Seven were seen in casuarina scrub ENE of Mt Mary on 19/9/54. The sightings drop off from here, with three birds in sparse acacia shrubs 3 miles W of Bower on 16/6/69, together with whitefaces and wrens, and one male singing in a geijera bush 5km SW of Bower on 10/4/77.

The nesting records include a pair with a nest containing 3 or 4 young, 5 miles NW of Bower on 6/12/53. The nest was low in a bluebush and made from grass, stems of *zygophyllum* and strips of fine bark. Both parents were carrying insect food, but were shy and were only once observed going to the nest with food. In Section 9 Hd of Bower amongst *Cassia sturtii* (now *Senna artemisioides*) in a paddock near casuarina scrub a nest with several young was attended by both parents on 29/10/54. The nest was placed in a *Rhagodia spinescens* (thorny saltbush) bush and built of grass stems and leaves and lined with feathers. In the Hd of Bower a juvenile not long out of the nest was observed on 13/11/54. Also in the Hd of Bower a nest containing at least 2 young was found on 22/10/55 in a low *Rhagodia spinescens* bush in casuarina scrub. Built of grass, the nest had a short entrance platform about 6 inches off the ground and both birds were carrying food to the nestlings. On 26/8/57 another nest was found in a *Rhagodia spinescens* bush 15 inches from the ground, built of grass with the hairy panicle of *Austrostipa elegantissima* (feather speargrass) and feathers of the Stubble Quail. The female flushed from the nest which contained 3 eggs.

Originally occurring in the shrub stratum of saltbush and bluebush in mallee scrub with geijera, the Shy Heathwren adapted to dense patches of regrowth mallee of 3-6 feet in height (Boehm 1957). They hop along like sparrows when foraging undisturbed, and occasionally run across open patches of ground between shrubs or clumps of shoots. Boehm considered them not common, and apparently more often heard than seen. They often sing in undertones while on the ground, and at intervals give sharp scolding calls. Their loud singing is done while perched on a shrub or branchlet about 2-4 feet off the ground.

Boehm did not record the Rufous Fieldwren from the Mt Mary Plains either in publications or in the notebooks; however he did see three birds and secured one as a specimen from bluebush and saltbush on the north side of Burra Creek at Florieton just north of the area on 9/4/55. This occurred during an Easter camp to the Burra Creek involving Boehm, Mr and Mrs Brian Glover and Richard Schodde (Schodde 1956).

Now considered one species, the Splendid Fairy-wren was at the time Boehm was making observations thought to be two distinct species – the Black-backed Wren (*Malurus melanotus*) and the Turquoise Wren (*M. callainus*). He reported his birds as Black-backed, but most sightings were from outside of the Mt Mary Plains area as he defined it. There are only three records that I can locate from within the area. Two or more wrens, including an adult male, were at Erdora homestead on 2/3/67. Two pairs, the male in each case in brilliant breeding plumage, were seen in a patch of black oak, 5km ENE of Mt Mary on 25/8/74. Two birds were 5km west of Bower in black oak scrub on 2/11/77. One was a male in partial adult plumage but the birds did not remain in the area. Erhard described this as a new locality record and the most western one on the Mt Mary Plains, but Erdora is further west, so I find this confusing. Other locations where Boehm recorded Splendid (Black-backed) Wren include Annadale, near Eba in a dry box swamp, Portee station, Sandleton (a breeding record) and White Dam Conservation Park.

Family groups or small flocks of White-winged Fairy-wrens inhabit open country with large shrubs like acacias, bluebushes and Australian boxthorns.

When wheat-growing was largely abandoned in the 1940s shrubs regenerated on the cleared land to the benefit of this species (Boehm 1957). Some large autumnal flocks contained as many as three or four males in full colour. A flock of about 20 (including only one male in blue plumage) was in native boxthorn in Boxthorn Gully 6km SW of Bower on 22/2/76. Nests of this species are often constructed in a low spiny bush and generally face to the east. They are built of dry grass and often lined with the woolly perianths of *Bassia sclerolaenoides* (*Eriochiton sclerolaenoides*, woolly-fruit copperburr).

The most common wren was the Variegated Fairy-wren, occurring in scrub with undergrowth. Like the preceding species, flocks of up to 20 birds including 3-4 fully coloured males could be seen after the breeding season. Sometimes the birds perch among foliage of low trees 10-15 feet from the ground. Erhard believed that they decreased in number during the 1930s and 1940s in many parts of the district, as a result of the deterioration of their habitat (Boehm 1957).

Masked Woodswallows appear in flocks, often together with White-browed, in the spring of most years (Boehm 1957). They seem to come south on the first warm day with a northerly wind, while later in the season flocks of up to 200 can be seen flying at height during unsettled weather. One windy day a mixed flock of Masked Woodswallows, Starlings, Tree Martins and Welcome Swallows was seen on a stony knoll near Sutherlands. They feed on grasshoppers when these are abundant and in December 1939 flocks fed on *Austroicetes cruciata* (small plague locust). Clutches of 2-3 eggs have been found from September to December and rarely in January. From the mid-1950s this species became less common than the White-browed Woodswallow. However, during October 1977 it was in larger numbers than the White-browed. One specimen is in the SA Museum collected in November 1931. A hybrid between the two species was mist-netted and banded east of Sutherlands on 8/10/72. The bird resembled a male White-browed, but it lacked the eyebrow and had a black mask like the Masked (Boehm 1974c).

Occasionally seen as early as August, but more likely from October, the White-browed

Woodswallow is often in mixed flocks with the former species and many of the same comments apply. Both species prefer to breed in tall scrub where there are hollows on trunks and limbs for use as nest sites (Boehm 1957). One such nest in the hollow stump of a mallee 3.5 feet high contained 2 chicks on 7/1/51. There were many White-browed in a scattered congregation of woodswallows 5km NE of Sutherlands on 10/1/78, when there was an influx of this species that had been uncommon earlier in the season. Several settled in flowering red mallee (*E. oleosa*) in a creekline and clambered about among the blossoms apparently feeding on insects attracted to the blossom. There are two skins in the Boehm collection.

The Dusky Woodswallow is present throughout the year, but is nomadic and the birds congregate in flocks of up to 30-40 in autumn and winter (Boehm 1957). A flock of 100 was seen in regrowth mallee 5km NE of Sutherlands on 20/6/76. Nesting occurs in October and November with a few isolated nests in January.

Regarded as a rare visitor (Boehm 1929), the Black-faced Woodswallow is the least common of the woodswallows (Boehm 1957). Most birds move north at the end of autumn, but a few birds remain during the winter. There is an indication that the species became less common, as a notebook sighting of 3 birds in 1970 elicited the comment that these were the first seen for more than a year and that they were now less frequently seen. I can find only two records of nesting, with the first being a nest with 3 eggs in a geijera 10 miles NE of Sutherlands on 17/10/39. This nest was composed of grass and lined with stems of *Stenopetalum lineare* (narrow thread-petal). The second, a nest with 3 eggs near Bower on 16/10/46, was built in a bunch of branchlets on a limb of a false sandalwood, 8 feet from the ground. It was constructed of *Zygophyllum billardieri* (a twinleaf but perhaps not this species) branchlets and lined with rootlets. There is one skin and a clutch of eggs in the SA Museum.

**Penny Paton**