

SAOA Historical Series No 38

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

Part 11

To round out the Boehm Historical Series, I present Erhard Boehm's notes on the mammals and plants of the Mount Mary Plains and a summary of his contribution to the natural history of the area over seventy-five years, in fact most of the twentieth century. In addition there is a list of birds of the Nuriootpa district in one of his letters to Sutton which was not published in the *SAOrn*, which is surprising as Sutton was always keen to report on birds from country areas of South Australia. Unfortunately it is only a list with no annotations and we do not have Sutton's reply to Boehm so cannot shed any light on this decision not to publish the list. The list appears to have accompanied a letter from Boehm to Sutton dated 9th April 1929 and is titled, 'The Birds of Nuriootpa and surrounding districts'. I have given the list in full as there is so little published information from this area from the early years of the twentieth century. As far as I can tell there is only one species that would not be expected from this area (the Swift Parrot, discussed below). I have given the names as Boehm wrote them and, although some differ from the current English names, I do not think there is any doubt about the species referred to (the Crow is probably the Little Raven):

Emu, Stubble Quail, Peaceful Dove, Common Bronzewing, Crested Pigeon, Black-tailed native Hen, Little Grebe, Hoary-headed Grebe, Pied Cormorant, Silver Gull, Spur-winged Plover, Banded Plover, Red-capped Dotterel, Black-fronted Dotterel, Stone Curlew, Bustard, White-faced Heron, Black Swan, Black Duck, Grey Teal, Australian Goshawk, Collared Sparrowhawk, Wedge tailed Eagle, Whistling Eagle, Little Falcon, Brown Hawk, Kestrel, Boobook Owl, Rainbow Lorikeet, Musk Lorikeet, Purple-crowned lorikeet, White Cockatoo, Galah, Cockatiel, Adelaide Rosella, Ringneck Parrot, Red backed Parrot, Swift Parrot, Budgerygah, Tawny Frogmouth, Kookaburra, Sacred Kingfisher, Pallid Cuckoo, Horsefield Bronze Cuckoo, Welcome Swallow,



Erhard Boehm

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White-backed Swallow, Tree Martin, Grey Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Restless Flycatcher, Jacky Winter, Scarlet Robin, Red-capped Robin, Hooded Robin, Rufous Whistler, Golden Whistler, Grey Shrike Thrush, Magpie Lark, Black-faced Cuckoo Shrike, White-winged Triller, White-browed Babbler, White-fronted Chat, Eastern Whiteface, Little Thornbill, Yellow-tailed Thornbill, Brown Songlark, Blue Wren, Masked Wood Swallow, White brow and Dusky Woodswallow, Black-capped Sittella, Brown Tree Creeper, Mistletoe Bird, Red-tipped Pardalote, Yellow-tailed Pardalote, Silvereye, Brown-headed honeyeater, Singing Honeyeater, White-eared honeyeater, White-plumed Honeyeater, Yellow-plumed Honeyeater, Yellow-winged Honeyeater, Noisy Miner, Little & Red Wattlebirds, Spiney-cheeked Honeyeater, Pipit, Bushlark, Diamond Firetail, Zebra Finch, Crow, Grey Butcher Bird, White-backed Magpie

A subsequent letter from Boehm to Sutton dated 12th April 1929 obviously responds to a query about the Swift Parrot sighting and he writes:

"...Swift Parrot re your enquiry thereof – I took particular notice of the specimens in the S.A. Museum, which you showed me, so am sure the birds I saw here, & on the Murray & at Nuriootpa were no other than *Lathamus discolor*. I generally see them in company of Musk Lorikeets, but can distinguish them, even in flight because of their longer tail, and the red under surface of the wings. The two species are somewhat similarly coloured only *Lathamus* has a red throat and shoulder patch in addition to the above mentioned differing characters."

And again in letter dated 17th May 1929:

"...As to the Swift Parrot, I must say that I can hardly believe that I have confused the species with something else, and having come very near to the birds on several occasions, have felt that the identification is correct."

There is no further correspondence from Sutton about the Swift Parrot and, as he accepted Boehm's record of several Swift Parrots from the Sutherlands area in 1927 (Boehm 1929), we can assume that this was not the reason for not publishing the list in the *SAOrn*.

Mammals of the Mount Mary Plains

A notebook on mammals details the sightings of interest and specimens secured from the early 1930s to the 1980s. I have summarized these below. The **Echidna** was very rare on the Mount Mary Plains, with specimens secured from southeast of Sutherlands on 7/6/1933 and southwest of Bower on 25/9/1945. Additional sightings were from near Sutherlands on 7/12/1948, 10/3/1949, and 19/9/1963, and near Bower on 25/10/1970 (a half-grown individual) and 10/4/1977. An immature echidna was rescued from an underground disused water tank near Sutherlands on 9th October 1982 – one of many that became trapped in these tanks. Other animals succumbed to vehicles, particularly on the main Adelaide to Morgan road.

Notes made in the 1940s indicate that rare stragglers of the **Red Kangaroo** appeared in the cultivated areas of the Mount Mary Plains. Later entries indicate that they may have become more common, but erratic in their appearances. On the other hand, the **Western Grey Kangaroo** was observed singly, in pairs, or small parties feeding on grassy flats in the morning or evening on the Plains. A number of Red Kangaroos were seen during spring of 1956 on the Mount Mary Plains, but in the autumn of 1958 nearly all kangaroos seen on the Plains were grey kangaroos. In the autumn of 1959 a group of 25 Red Kangaroos was seen near Bower, but during 1968-70 only grey kangaroos were about. In the winter of 1979 Red Kangaroos were unusually numerous, with such numbers not seen for 25 years. Small groups of grey kangaroos were about the Sutherlands-Bower district during winter of 1975, usually with very small individuals, evidence of recent breeding.

One of Boehm's informants, S. George Kotz, reported **Euros** in the Tothill Ranges in the 1890s and Erhard believed that they were still there early in the twentieth century, possibly surviving to the present time (i.e. 1970s). Euros were observed in scrubby hills near Peep Hill, 8kms NE of Eudunda during July 1976 by Grantley C. Doecke. In the years before this Euros had been seen in the hills south of Eudunda around Mt Rufus. Erhard's notebook records that small colonies of **Tammar Wallabies** inhabited the Mount Mary Plains, usually in Geijera scrub, until the severe drought of 1914. This drought was also implicated in the disappearance of the **Boodie** (*Bettongia lesueur*) which older residents said was

once widely distributed and did considerable damage to crops.

George Kotz told Boehm that a species of **native cat** (*Dasyurus* sp.) inhabited the Tothill Ranges and Emu Downs district prior to 1900. These animals were sometimes trapped in rabbit warrens. He also believed that a species of **rock-wallaby** (*Petrogale* sp.) lived in the Tothills until about 1900. A small marsupial, the **Fat-tailed Dunnart** (*Sminthopsis crassicaudata*) was said by Boehm in the 1940s to be "still widely distributed though not often observed on the Mount Mary Plains". They lived in hollow stumps, logs, litter and short shallow burrows in the ground, retiring in winter to grass nests. Later on he writes that a few specimens were found in hollow decayed fence posts during fence repair work in the Sutherlands-Bower district during 1968-70. He thought they had held their own in the period since the 1930s. An adult was found by R.D. Milde near Point Pass on 13th May 1978. A specimen of an adult female, found in a dead hollow tree 17 miles north of Bower on 15/9/78 by C. W. Jaensch, was sent to the SA Museum.

The notebook relates that by the 1940s the **Brush-tailed Possum** was almost extinct on the Mount Mary Plains and more likely to be seen close to the eastern foothills of the Murray Range. A female collected by Boehm from Moppa, near Greenock, in 1933 was placed in the SA Museum. An immature was found dead, probably killed by a motor vehicle, in the ford of Deep Creek, on the main Eudunda to Morgan Road on 29th November 1956. The only other record was one in a hollow tree trunk, a few 100m west of an old homestead, Sect. 243 Hd of Neales, 3km SSW of Sutherlands during the 1970s. In 1978 Erhard recorded in his notebook that **Ring-tailed Possums** were occasionally still seen in the Angaston district according to local residents.

A 1940s entry indicated that the **Hairy-nosed Wombat** inhabited the southeastern portion of the Plains, with occasional individuals wandering westwards into the Hd of Neales. On 14th November 1940 an adult female was collected south of Sutherlands by A.R. Schiller. A skull collected by Boehm from Craigie's Plain in 1941 was sent to the SA Museum. The species appeared to increase its distribution in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, on 1/8/63 Erhard's dog disturbed a wombat in very good condition on his property east of Sutherlands. In 1962-63 wombats established a warren in an old rabbit warren 3 miles WNW of Bower, with several other warrens appearing over the next 8 years. Also between 1968 and 1970 warrens established along Deep Creek, east of Eudunda, and there was a sighting of a wombat at Neales Flat in May 1970. The penultimate entry in the notebook notes a report from P. Schiller in 1990 of a marked

increase in wombats in the Sutherlands and nearby foothills north to Australia Plains.

C. Jaensch of Florieton stated that after the large bushfires in the Mount Mary-Florieton region in 1974-75, hopping mice were frequently seen. Erhard thought these were most likely referable to **Mitchell's Hopping Mouse** (*Notomys mitchellii*).

Of the bats, Erhard considered the **Lesser Long-eared Bat** (*Nyctophilus geoffroyi*) to be the most widely distributed, although nowhere was it numerous. Other species seen or collected were **Gould's Wattled Bat** (*Chalinobus gouldii*), **Chocolate Bat** (*C. morio*) and **Little Bat** (*Eptesicus pumilio*) (a male drowned in a billycan of cream hanging under the homestead verandah on 30/3/1966). Presumably from information from his father and grandfather, Erhard stated that **Dingoes** inhabited the Mount Mary Plains in the 1880s and 1890s.

Boehm also recorded information on introduced mammals, beginning with the **European Fox** (*Vulpes vulpes*), which appeared on the Plains in the 1890s and soon established, despite efforts to exterminate them. The **Feral Cat** (*Felis catus*) established in the 1880s and 1890s and one large male trapped by Erhard's father weighed 13 pounds. The notebook indicates that there were herds of up to 50 feral **cattle** (*Bos taurus*) on the Plains, and they did considerable damage to wheat crops. Feral **horses** (*Equus caballus*) of medium draught type were rarely seen on the Plains in the 1880s. Erhard reports a **Brown Rat** (*Rattus norvegicus*) secured from a barn east of Sutherlands on 26/9/30, a **Black Rat** (*R. rattus*) collected at Auburn by C.E. Schmerb, on 19/12/31 and the first record of a Black Rat from Sutherlands, from a wheat barn on 17/1/49. In the 1970s small groups of feral **goats** (*Capra hircus*) established in the Sutherlands-Bower district. A flock of 12 animals, including two kids, was seen in March 1975 5 km west of Bower. Six feral goats were seen in black oak scrub, 5 km ENE of Mount Mary on 31/1/81. An entry regarding wild **pigs** (*Sus scrofa*) referenced the 'Eudunda Courier' of 22nd June 1978, in which an anonymous writer stated that wild pigs occurred on Haylands Station, north of Craigie's Plain, in the early days of European settlement. The animals were hunted with dogs by the settlers and some were caught for fattening and slaughtering.

Plants of the Mount Mary Plains

There is one notebook, called 'Botanical Notes', that details the first records of introduced plants as well as giving summary comments on some native species. They attest to his acute observational skills and botanical expertise from the early 1930s to the 1990s, when at the

age of 80 he was still contributing specimens to the SA Herbarium. This is not the appropriate place to do justice to these records, but I hope that this notebook will be conned by herbarium specialists who will publish the information in a recognized journal.

Summary of Erhard Boehm's contribution to natural history in South Australia

I have merely scratched the surface of Erhard Boehm's contribution to natural history in South Australia and the notebooks contain more information than I have had time to retrieve. I have concentrated on the notebooks that cover the Sutherlands district where Boehm spent most of his life and where his contributions were greatest. I have only covered the ornithological notebooks that operate as a daily diary and the summary notebooks, not those that list species from particular locations. The 18 ornithological notebooks contain information from many localities away from the Mount Mary Plains, including the Adelaide area and Mt Lofty Ranges. There are also many meticulous notes covering the period of his retirement at Valley View from 1979-1994. During this time he walked several times a week in Anstey Hill Conservation Park and meticulously recorded birds there, as well as generally in his suburb.

Graham Carpenter kindly provided me with some papers prepared by Erhard in the early 1980s, some of which were for a PhD student working at Brookfield Conservation Park. They attest to his natural history abilities, but also to his observational skills, careful documentation and knowledge of international literature.

In addition to the notebooks, the SAOA possesses other Boehm material, mainly in the form of correspondence. There are a number of letters from Erhard to John Sutton when the latter was Secretary of the Association and conducted a prolific correspondence with country members. These letters span from 1928 to 1936. The first letter, dated 11th June 1928, deals with some identification queries sent to the Museum previously and more general enquiries about the distribution of species. See Part II for a detailed examination of the correspondence between Sutton and Boehm. Later correspondence from Erhard held by the SAOA involves mainly books or journals on loan from the library. There is also a typed letter from Erhard (22/2/92) to Penny Paton, indicating that he was not feeling well enough to take part in an oral history session, but enclosing a hand-written short account of his natural history endeavours. I have included this below in full:

"Memoirs of Erhard Boehm, naturalist and rationalist.

There is little I want to add to the story of my life that is additional to H.M. Whittell's, 1954, pp 60-62 outline. My published papers and notes give the findings of my work from the late 1920s to more recent times. However, in November 1989, I prepared and gave to S.A. Museum a Revised Ornithological Note Book, with an appendix of a bibliography of papers published since those listed by Whittell, 1954.

It is perhaps more interesting to relate how some-one on a remote farm outside of Goyder's Line and subject to droughts and innumerable other setbacks managed to become a student of nature and of birds in particular. There was no helper, or mentor, no local library to provide the necessary literature, and in those depression years, no money to provide books and magazines. No-one locally knew the names of most birds, animals and plants, and more-over, in a theologically fundamentalist, creationist community, natural science was regarded with suspicion, as being a threat to traditional beliefs.

Eventually I obtained literature through the Country Lending Service of the State Public Library, and this helped to fill in gaps in my knowledge of scientific thinking.

Initially I collected natural history specimens in a private collection, but later I realized the disadvantages of this, and decided to collect in a voluntary role for the S.A. Museum and the State Herbarium.

During the 1960s to early 1980s I banded birds on the Mount Mary Plains, S.A. and this is probably the only similar arid region in Australia that has been studied to the same degree and with the resulting published papers.

My interest in Nature Conservation first arose from hearing my Grandfather, C.G. Boehm, telling of the virgin state of the country and the disappearance of many forms of wildlife following European occupation. There seems little that can be done now to undo the damage, and as the human population grows, there will inevitably be greater demands for food, timber, and metals. This in turn will result in more interference with environments, habitats, and essential ecosystems.

Whatever studies are done, the remedial measures for conservation nearly always lag a long way behind, sometimes so much so as to be too late.

There are numerous remote pastoral and even some agricultural regions of South Australia that are poorly known ornithologically, having been visited only irregularly by interested individuals. It seems unlikely that resident capable ornithologists can be created in any

way to fill the gap. Only an exceptional individual with special self-dedication, and prepared to make the financial sacrifices needed for equipment and the work, not to mention the social sacrifices this imposes on one's family by limiting social contacts through work devoted to natural history pursuits.

While I have no regrets at all about my own involvement in this work, I am not prepared to advise others in similar situations to do likewise.

Nowadays very fine field guide-books, colour photography, and the general knowledge of species' distribution and habits makes the study so much easier than it was half a century ago. Nevertheless, country members need contact and assistance with notes and papers, and it should always be emphasized that our State Museum reference collection needs specimens for specialized research in ontogeny and taxonomy, and, in some cases, this requires a knowledge of skin preparation. The best colour photograph cannot compare with a specimen that can be critically examined, compared, measured, and weighed, and possibly sent away to another institution for further comparative studies."

Penny Paton, October 2011