

SAOA Historical Series Number 4

Max S. Kuss

In the SAOA Correspondence Files is a box containing letters grouped according to the correspondent rather than in chronological order and one of the correspondents is Max S. Kuss. Sixteen of his letters to John Sutton (himself the subject of Historical Series Number 1) survive and these were written between March 1933 and July 1936. John Sutton appears to have replied to all of these and copies of nine of these are in the collection, as well as a rough draft of one which is written on the letter from Max Kuss of 20/7/36. Mention is made by Kuss of a letter from John Sutton that arrived on 22/7/34 but this has not been found.

There is very little personal information about Max Kuss in these letters. We learn that at least from March 1933 until October 1933 he was living on a farm at Lowbank and that he probably lived at Lowbank for eight years. An article by Kuss in the *SAOrn* describes Lowbank as being on the River Murray, six miles by road and 10 miles by river upstream of Waikerie. From comments in a later letter, he was either working on a farm owned by someone else or on the family farm. In his first letter from Murray Bridge (11/2/34) he comments that:

“Previously to this I had no definite prospects for nearly three years, and this perhaps accounts for my eagerness to make the most of the present opportunity.”

This same letter notes that he left Lowbank in the middle of October 1933 and that he is currently working from dawn to dusk building up a poultry farm, raising chickens, building up a home, laying out a garden and “batching”. From this we can probably assume that he was not married. The last letter that we have (20/7/36) talks about his chickens finishing their moult and commencing to lay again, so he was obviously still in business at that date.

From his letters Max Kuss comes across as a modest & humble man and he often expresses how grateful he is that John Sutton and other

ornithologists are willing to help him. For example in his letter of 30/4/33 he writes:

“I keep a Bird Note Diary, and if any of the notes are of interest I shall be pleased to forward them from time to time. On the other hand, if my notes are valueless, and my letters waste too much of your time, I shall not be offended if you tell me.”

His starting out in business points to his being a young man, as does this comment in a letter of 14/3/33:

“It is gratifying to note the interest Dr. Morgan and you apparently take in helping a “budding ornithologist” and I should like to make a few further comments relative to yours, with the hope that I am not wasting your precious time...”

Max’s handwriting is even and his grammar and spelling are good, reflecting a reasonable education. This is supported by a comment made by John Sutton in his last reply to Max (24/7/36), referring to the foreign magazines that Max wanted to borrow. Sutton indicates that it would be best for him to look at them when he is next in Adelaide to make sure that they are likely to be of interest to him. As Kuss is a German name it is likely that these foreign language magazines were in German.

We know that John Sutton & Max Kuss met as item 1 of their correspondence – the list of birds recorded from Lowbank (in Sutton’s hand) - includes an excerpt from a letter from Kuss dated 24/2/33:

“About a month ago, whilst visiting the Museum, your ornithologist suggested that I prepare a list of birds noticed in this locality. I have now compiled a list and enclose it herewith.”

This letter of 24/2 has not survived in SAOA records & in fact Kuss’ letter of 30/5/33 talks about the list of birds, but there is no list appended.

Kuss indicates in his letter of 14/3/33 that he has always been a keen lover of nature but has only made a closer study of birds over the last two or three years. He seems to have been very observant;

e.g. when Morgan & Sutton queried whether he had the Diamond Dove and not the Peaceful, he replied:

“Your statement that *G. placida* (sic) is more likely to be present here is perhaps true, but I have very little doubt that *G. cuneata* (sic) is also present. I drew my identification from white spots on wing, and red eyes.”

Max was also an active bird observer as his comments (in letter of 11/2/34) about the Whistling Kite nests that he had known at Lowbank attest. He describes 10 nests, all of which he climbed to, and the tallest was 84 feet from the ground! He also states that he tested the solidity of several nests by jumping on them without inflicting any damage. He notes that the same nests were used year after year, all were wedged into forks of tall gums (mostly over or near the water) and that birds used the nests all year round for eating prey. Outside of the breeding season the tops of the nests are worn and flat from constant use and the sort of remains found there include rabbits' bones and fur, crayfish claws, fish scales and bones, and small pebbles.

Early in his correspondence with Sutton, Max asked about the possibility of getting a collection permit, to enable closer inspection of birds for better identification. Sutton approached the Director of the SA Museum, but due to someone doing the wrong thing (trading with specimens), the Museum was unable to sponsor him, so he could not get a permit from the Chief Inspector of Fisheries & Game. Kuss took this in good part, merely commenting that the genuine collector would be the last person to destroy or harm the birds needlessly. He also noted that with egg collecting, taking the first clutch would in most cases cause the birds to lay a second. John Sutton sympathized with this view (14/5/33):

“With regard to skins I should say that it takes at least 30 minutes to make a good

specimen and a collector gets fairly tired after making up to three birds so he is not likely to destroy many birds.”

In the list of birds in the Lowbank district in Sutton's hand, brief comments are made about most bird species, usually relating to abundance, habitat or breeding. A few comments relate to the locks on the river and their effects on birds which are of interest given the current debate on the River Murray and environmental flows. Of the Dusky Moorhen, Kuss notes — “Fairly common, but numbers influenced by height of river. Have been noticed only in recent years, since river locks are in operation, thus guarding against any low river.” Of the Australian Coot, Kuss comments — “Common, but only since completion of locks.”

All copy letters from John Sutton that have a home address, which is nearly all, are from No. 12 Fullarton Rd, Mitcham. Max's letters are either headed Murray Bridge, Lowbank or Lowbank via Morgan. Max always addressed John Sutton as Mr Sutton & Sutton usually addressed him as Mr Kuss, but once as Kuss. Max's letters are generally fairly earnest in tone, but he finishes one letter (13/8/33) by asking Sutton whether he finds Cayley's illustrations very reliable, noting that he finds some of them “rather misleading.” Anyone who has tried to use Cayley will sympathize with this. Sutton's answer to this is worth quoting in full & shows that he had a sense of humour:

“re Cayley's book. On the whole it is a poor book to identify birds by as the coloured illustrations are far too small. Leach's appears to me to be a better book because it gives a pithy description — but his birds never laid eggs or had a nest!!”

I have checked Whittell (1954) for reference to Kuss, but there is no extra information other than that provided in the articles published in the *SAOrn*. There are three notes/articles by Kuss in the *Ornithologist* and the references are given in the Bibliography.

In an effort to find out more about Max Kuss I contacted several members of the Kuss family

from the Adelaide White Pages. From them I learnt that there are two Kuss families, one Adelaide-based and the other referred to as the Murray River family. To add to this confusion there is a Max Kuss in the Adelaide family as well. However I was not able to make contact with a member of the Murray River family in the limited time before going to print to find out any more details about 'our' Max Kuss.

Below I have listed the items in the correspondence between John Sutton and Max Kuss held by the SAOA and upon which this paper was based. JS = John Sutton and MK = Max Kuss.

- 1 In JS handwriting a list of birds recorded by MK from Lowbank region (published in *SAOrn*) – taken from letter from MK
- 2 6/3/33 copy of letter from JS to MK
3. 14/3/33 letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
4. 28/3/33 copy letter from JS to MK
5. 20/4/33 letter from MK to JS, Lowbank via Morgan
6. 24/4/33 copy letter from JS to MK
7. 30/4/33 letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
8. 13/5/33, letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
9. 14/5/33, copy letter from JS to MK
10. 30/5/33, letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
11. 6/6/33, copy letter from JS to MK
12. 12/6/33, letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
13. 12/7/33, letter from JS to MK (looks like original but presumably a copy)
14. 26/7/33, letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
15. 13/8/33, letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
16. 12/9/33, copy letter from JS to MK
17. 17/9/33, letter from MK to JS, Lowbank
- 18 11/2/34, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge (with observations on Lowbank birds, especially Whistling Kite nests)
19. 31/3/34, copy letter from JS to MK
20. 22/4/34, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge
21. 7/5/34, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge
22. 15/7/34, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge
23. 23/7/34, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge (mentions a letter of JS that arrived on 22/7 – no record in this group of letters)
24. 5/8/34, copy letter from JS to MK
25. 15/6/35, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge
26. 20/7/36, letter from MK to JS, Murray Bridge (on 2nd page, JS has added his reply of 24/7/36)

Bibliography

- Kuss, Max S. 1933. Birds of the Lowbank District, S. A. *SA Orn*, 12, pt 3, 85-92.
 Kuss, Max S. 1933. Birds of the Lowbank District. *SA Orn*, 12, pt 4, 127.
 Kuss, Max S. 1934. Further Notes on Birds of the Lowbank District. *SA Orn*, 12, pt 6, 204-206.
 Whittell, H.M. 1954. The Literature of Australian Birds. Paterson Brokensha Pty Ltd, Perth.

Penny Paton, February 2003