# SAOA Historical Series No 40

# F. W. Andrews

## Introduction to F. W. Andrews

After Gould's seven-week visit to the fledgling colony of South Australia between May and July 1839 several individuals sent collections of bird specimens to him. These people included Governors Gawler and Grey, Charles Sturt and a younger assistant of the last, Frederick Strange. However, the South Australian collector who had the greatest impact on the nineteenth century ornithological world was Frederick William Andrews who collected, not for Gould, but for the early South Australian Museum.

At the time of his death in 1884 no relative could be located and his date and place of birth remain unknown. Also unclear are details surrounding the last six months of his life and what might have contributed to his sad and sudden demise.

Cleland (1937) and Whittell (1954) provided summaries of Andrews' ornithological work, while Stirling (1885) and Loyau (1885) offered early tributes; but there are uncertainties and ambiguities in all accounts. Loyau stated that Andrews had been in the band of the Coldstream Guards when the Regiment was in Dublin and that he performed excellently on the ophecleide, an obsolete deep toned brass instrument. There are occasional allusions in Andrews' newspaper articles consistent with a musical education but no one has yet confirmed his engagement in military music-making.

Andrews was a private collector and taxidermist who supplied the museum with items of natural history, chiefly birds but also including mammals, reptiles, fish and invertebrates, but he was not initially employed by the museum as sometimes reported. His first collection was supplied from Port Lincoln in 1864 when he was thought to be about 40 years old. His last collection, from the Gawler Ranges, was received in 1884 a few months before his death and only a year after he had gained employment at the museum. He also collected from the upper and lower Murray, the lower Southeast and from the Mount Compass area where he was living in the time leading up to his death.

Andrews is widely known and respected for two exceptional accomplishments: he collected the type specimens of the Eyrean Grasswren as naturalist on the Lewis Lake Eyre survey (1844-45) and obtained all but a handful of the Night Parrot skins in existence in museums around the world (Forshaw *et al* 1975). All but one of the latter were taken in the Gawler Ranges between 1871 and 1880 and Andrews was the only non-indigenous person ever to go into the field looking for Night Parrots and actually finding one. His widely quoted account (Andrews 1883) of finding Night Parrots consists of less than 450 words, yet only fragmentary details have been added since that time.

Andrews made other important discoveries. He collected the type specimen of the Golden-backed Honeyeater and probably the first Grey-headed Honeyeater while on the Lewis Expedition. These were sent with the 'new grasswrens' to Gould who named the first honeyeater but could not identify the latter and apparently never made the further comparisons that he had intended (Sutton 1927). He also discovered the Gawler Ranges population of Western Grasswrens thirty years before they were seen and reported by Chenery and Morgan (Chenery 1902). He provided the museum with specimens of Scarlet-chested Parrots from the upper Murray and the Gawler Ranges; Spotted Bowerbirds and their bowers from the former and, among the mammals, Numbats from both regions.

As will be seen from his newspaper articles Andrews wrote fluently and lucidly about birds. He also made contributions to anthropology with observations of the indigenous peoples of the Lake Eyre region and of the Aru Islands, the latter after his ill-fated journey with Samuel White (senior) in 1880.

An enquiry into Andrews' death was held in Willunga on 20 October 1884, after his body

had been found face down the day before in a running stream two miles towards Myponga from Mount Jagged. During the previous week, though he was said to have been living in a house nearby, he had been camping rough and had not eaten for several days. Witnesses included neither those with whom he had been living nor his recent employer, the museum, whose Director had noted his unaccountable absence (since 31 March!). On the basis of rather spurious evidence the jury concluded that "the old man" had died after falling into the water while suffering from the effects of sunstroke.

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Note: unreferenced observations are generally the results of examination of South Australian Museum archival and related historical material, made with the help and support of Philip Jones and Philippa Horton.

**Andrew Black, February 2012.**

Ten articles by Andrews on the natural history of South Australia were published in the South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail between March and June 1877. The first nine of these are devoted to birds. The first two, which follow, appeared on 3 and 17 March. Further articles on birds by Andrews were published in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia in 1883.*

The spelling, grammar and punctuation are reproduced as per the original. My comments are in square brackets.

**Graham Carpenter**

## NOTES ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

**By F. W. A.**

**No. I.**

We often spend a pleasant hour in reading travels and adventures by land and sea, by various writers in Natural history. We always take especial interest in any descriptive account of animals which are known to us as being local, but scarcely ever thought worthy of notice. In fact, there are many animals and birds that have their habitat almost at our doors, and yet we know nothing of them. But as more attention is now given to Zoology in an educational point of view, doubtless the enquiring minds of our youthful community, will find in this delightful science a never-failing field of knowledge and information. I purpose in these papers to describe the habits (and economy, so far as I can) of the various birds, animals &c., peculiar to South Australia. Many young men well and profitably employ their time by working out problems in chess, mathematics, &c. These are mostly young people used to sedentary pursuits. If my notes assist others who feel out of doors to agree with their constitution better than inside, and bring their ideas into a reflecting form of habit, my object will be obtained. The shortest walk we have to take may be made the means of instruction and amusement if we only keep our eyes and ears open. I shall commence at the beginning of the class aves (birds), and pass from the eagles and hawks right through to the penguins, afterwards the animals, reptiles &c. It was on the River Murray that I first had the

opportunity of meeting with that very noble bird, *Hailaster leucosternus*, (white-breasted eagle) [White-bellied Sea-Eagle]. This was a few miles below Portee Station, where my attention was drawn to an unearthly noise made, by at first I knew not what, but on going round my camp to ascertain the cause I saw one of these birds making a bold swoop across the river, and uttering a cry that could only be equalled by a chorus of laughing maniacs, and bringing at once to my mind the graphic description, by Wilson, of a similar bird in America. It alighted on a fine large gum tree a short distance down the river, and on looking round I saw an immense nest in another tree not far away. I observed the female bird was sitting on the nest, and being anxious to secure birds and eggs if I could, I arranged my camp and prepared for a stay, to watch their habits and secure pair-eggs &c., if possible. Next morning I was up with the laughing jackass, who called me with his accustomed punctuality, and I repaired to the site of the nest, being anxious to find out what such large birds could be feeding on, and knowing that it would take a well-filled larder to supply the wants of the younger expected members of their family. I could see the hen bird seated on the nest - the other "stern parent" had made an early start, no doubt bearing in mind that the early bird catches the worm. I now took up a position where I could observe the whole of the arrangements. The tree was a fine bluegum, with straight clean barrel for about 40 feet, then an interlaced growth of forky branches: on the base of this the nest was built. This nest was fully double in capacity to any nest of the eaglehawk [Wedge-tailed Eagle] I ever saw. Some time before this the river had been in full flood, and all the back lagoons filled; the river having fallen slightly, had left the banks dry between the back lagoons and the river. I now observed that numbers of the Murray Turtle (*Emys*), Chelodina Longicollis, and Hydraspes Australis, had resorted to the lagoons during the flood, had from there made their way to the adjacent sand-hills, laid their deposit of eggs, and were now slowly returning to the river as the back waters dried up. I saw a shining object moving from the lagoon to the river over the bank: this was a turtle making its way to the deep waters of the river again. A loud "Hor, hor, hor," and a swooping descent of the foraging bird, then the stoppage of the turtle, whose head and neck being withdrawn into its shell (*carapace*) promises its security. The eagle picks it up, flies up to the nest, pulls out the legs, entrails, head and neck, and drops the shell to the ground. On going to examine the shell which I had seen dropped, I at once discovered the source of supply. I counted 47 empty shells around the bottom of the tree underneath the nest. I carefully noted their habits for several days, and it was only very rarely that any other food was procurable. There were several other members of the hawk family, all living on what they could catch on or in the river. The osprey (pandion leucocephalus), the whistling eagle (haliastur sphenurus). These birds were constantly on the alert for a fish, dead or alive, so that we cannot but deeply regard the instinct of the eagle we are writing of as something wonderful in making their "house and home" in a position where unlimited food was procurable for themselves and their progeny. A pair of these birds had a nest for several years on a rock on one of the islands in the gulf near Poonindie. These I observed to subsist principally on dead fish, shellfish, garbage, &c. They have not the quickness of flight or the lightning-like velocity of the eaglehawk (aquilla audax), of which my next paper will be descriptive.

## NOTES ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
### No. II.
### By F. W. A.

In my first article I purposed going through every bird according to its classification. I shall now, however, to abbreviate, and at the same time make the subject interesting, proceed with the different families, faithfully as I can describing any individual member specially worthy of notice. The bird which I am now writing on, the eaglehawk (*Aquila Audax*) [Wedge-tailed Eagle], stands at the head of the list of Australian ornithology, and justly so, for a more noble bird is nowhere to be found. Firstly, to give it a good name, I make a short reference to Gould, who says in his work on

Australian Ornithology, although he had not yet observed any specimen in any collection either from the northern portion of the Australia or any other country:-"In all probability it will hereafter be found to extend its range as far towards the tropics in the southern hemisphere as the Golden Eagle (Aquila Chrysaeta) does on the northern, the two birds being in fact beautiful analogues of each other in their respective habits, and doubtless performing similar offices in the great scheme of creation." I may here remark that I saw several pairs of these birds on Macumba Creek, lat. $27^0$ 50', and afterwards, journeying up Cooper's Creek, they were lost sight of, the gap being filled by that most noble of all, the Falconidae (*Falco Subinger*) [Black Falcon]. Of these, however, more hereafter. Owing to the rapid opening up of the country, the clearing of timber, and total destruction of all arboreal *standii* for small animals of the wallaby tribe, and having leporine habits, the range of these birds has of necessity made a move for itself. They are, however, very numerous in some parts of the colony, and here I must make a digression and speak of their bad qualities, which are two well known to need any description, or at any rate very much description. As, however, I am not writing for those who know everything about bush natural history, I proceed with my remarks. During the time of lambing, which often in this colony claims two seasons from and after May, and from and after August, the sheep-farmer and squatter has a terrible foe to his lambs in this bird.

All birds are furnished with two very strong pectoral muscles; these muscles are situated, as the name indicates, on each side of the breast bone. They are trifling in the quadrupeds and mammalia in comparison with those of birds. These muscles, which give motion to their wings, are wonderfully strong, and by means of them "a blow from an eagle has been known to cause instant death." During the time of lambing these birds (and crows) are constantly on the alert, and any lamb that may cause to take a siesta after its milk is almost sure (in the absence of the "dupe of a dam") to get a "clout" from the wing of one of these eaglehawks, be knocked senseless, torn piecemeal, and often half devoured, before the weary lamb-minder has the faintest idea of any danger being at hand. Their powers of flight are wonderful, and in their beautiful aerial evolutions they often assume quite a pensile object of admiration. If it is in the power of one animate being to enjoy a draught of "God's glorious oxygen" with greater facility than another, here is the one to have it. Pelicans can sail up pretty straight too, but I reserve my remarks on these gentry for other papers. Retaliation, however, now comes, and the shepherd, the cook, the dog poisoner are brought into requisition. I once saw a dead sheep (in the Gawler Ranges) "baited" for dogs and hawks by a youth, the son of a shepherd on the station. Nine eagle-hawks lay dead there next day, and I took the opportunity of taking out the small bones of the wings for tobacco pipe stems for my friends. The father of the speculative youth who administered the "cold poison" received one pound two shillings and sixpence for his trouble. The usual reward for a pair of hawk's claws being 2s. 6d., or half a pound of tobacco as bush payment. I have often found the nests of these eaglehawks in very low trees, where it was but a step or two to examine the nest or take the eggs. The young are for some time covered with a white down - a specimen may be seen in the Adelaide Museum. Considerable variations of plumage occur in the adult birds, principally caused by age, a plenitude of food, and other causes. The best test as to the plumage of this bird is, however, found by the farinose feel of the feathers, as, for instance, in the white cockatoo.