

# SAOA Historical Series No 41

## F. W. Andrews (cont)

The following two articles by F. W. Andrews were published in the South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail on 7 and 14 April 1877. The spelling, grammar and punctuation are reproduced as per the original. Current common names for birds are in square brackets.

**Graham Carpenter**

### NOTES ON THE ZOOLOGY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA — No. III.

By F. W. A.

There is perhaps no country in the world that in its fauna can claim a finer variety of the "Falconidae" than Australia, and all the principal members of the family are to be found in South Australia. Comparatively few persons, however, pay very much attention to the habits of the different members of this tribe, which are always interestingly attractive. The name "falcon" has its derivation from the Latin "*falco*", and points to the hooked form of the beak. There is also another feature by which one species of hawk may be easily recognised from the other, viz., by the length of the primary quill feathers. The black falcon (*falco subniger*) is a fine, bold bird, which is not often seen near Adelaide. They are sometimes to be seen on the Murray River in dry seasons, and although the falcons are always regarded as birds of prey, and never eating anything but what they secure by the exercise of their own "talons", I, at these times observed them feeding with kites (*milvus affinis*)[Black Kite], and the white-eyed crows (*corvus coronoides*)[Australian Raven], on dead fish, &c. "One touch of nature makes men (and birds) akin." The neighbourhood of Lake Hope is where I have observed them to be the most numerous, and they are there well-known to the stockmen by the manner they follow them about when riding through the bush, as numbers of small birds get disturbed by the horse the stockman is riding, to which the black hawk gives chase, seldom ever missing the bird. On my arrival at Lake Hope I made enquiries of the stockmen if they had ever observed any of these birds in their district, and they at once informed me of their presence as being common there,

and I had immediate opportunities of gratifying a long-wished object of interest, as Gould, in his "Australian Ornithology," knew very little of this interesting bird, and I had the pleasure of supplying our Museum with specimens and duplicates. They generally fly higher than the other falcons, and on observing a bird, they make a descent that is inconceivably rapid, seldom missing a capture; but I have seen them give a flap with one wing on one side of a low bush, and then repeat the stroke on the other, but the poor little "tit" was too frightened to fly out, and so saved its life. They usually make their nest in the closely matted twigs of some stunted gum-tree, and mostly lay two eggs, reddish ground, with rusty spots. Any readers of these notes in the bush would confer a great benefit, and give much assistance to curators of museums by saving the eggs; but it would be also necessary to skin and save the heads of the birds and forward with them; an ovalogical collection of Australia requires much time and patience to complete, and would be most desirable to have in our Museum. The eggs of many of our Australian birds have never yet been found. These I shall observe as I proceed. These hawks do not attain their full plumage of a fine blackish color for two or three years, and when young are often mistaken for another hawk (*teracidea berigora*)[Brown Falcon], which is usually known to bush residents as the quail hawk.

There is a well-known falcon on the Murray River called the duck hawk. This bird, which from its great strength of build and rapid powers

of flight can kill a duck at a single blow, is the black-cheeked falcon (*Falco melanogenys*) [Peregrine Falcon], and by its strength, its size, beauty, and elegance of plumage, is generally regarded as the prince of its type. They may often be seen sitting on the cliffs bordering the Murray, watching the ducks, which are much disturbed and put up by some coming steamer, when they give chase with a power that seldom admits of resistance. The duck which they generally single out for their prey is the white-eyed duck (*Myroca Australis*) [Hardhead], generally called the "wonkary." It is very like in size and habits to the canvas back (*Myroca*) of America. When feeding these hawks gorge themselves to repletion, and sit motionless afterwards for hours, with half closed eyes, on some dark shady gum tree or craggy rock. In the first great Exhibition in Hyde Park a case containing an exhibit in the art of taxidermy, called "The Gorged Falcon," was pronounced to bring the art of taxidermy as near perfection as possible, the artist having carefully borne in mind that "perfection of art is to conceal art." When these hawks feel the calls of hunger again, and they make another start, there is an immediate outcry amongst all the little birds as this dreaded "birdcatcher" makes his way, one bird giving the alarm to the other, and, no doubt affording mutual protection. There is a hawk on the Murray that is a good guide to the traveller looking for water, and I have often met with them at waterholes in other parts of the colony. This bird is called the whistling eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*) [Whistling Kite]. They have a peculiar attractive up-and-down kind of call, and on several occasions I have been led to find waterholes when I have been in a strange place, by hearing their whistling cry. They always are found, however, where there are plenty of gumtrees as well as water. The traveller may often travel for miles down a well-timbered river or creek and not find a drop of water, in the dry weather, until he is enabled by the cry of this bird to find the "hole." Several pairs are usually together, and they live on garbage, small

lizards, dead fish, &c. They have not the lightness of form adapted for birds taking their prey on the wing, and are oftener seen feeding on the ground. They are, however, fine attractive birds, and by their presence where there is plenty of water, by their loud and no means unpleasant notes, which often sound as if they were attempting an octave, impart cheerfulness to lonely spots in the bush. The peculiar vocalization of Australian birds often partakes more of talking than singing, and several of them have most attractive warbling trills.

There is a very handsome member of the falcons known as the white fronted Falcon (*Falco frontatus*) [Australian Hobby]. This bird is not so often seen in South Australia now on account of the opening up of the country. Some years back, when quail used to be so numerous on the "plains," that are now turned into ploughed fields, these hawks were often to be seen catching them. I once saw one of the western brown hawks (*Jeracidea occidentalis*) [Brown Falcon] sitting on a dead tree watching a flock of sheep that were feeding. By and by a quail disturbed by the sheep flew up, and after it went the hawk. A cry from the quail, a shower of feathers from its body as it was secured, and the hawk flew off towards a tree to devour its prey at its leisure; but at this moment a white fronted falcon that had descried the affair far away, came by with lightning-like velocity. The captor of the quail instantly altered its course from the tree, and flew up in the air, making wide circles to get out of the way of the little falcon, which, however, adopted the same tactics, and by making wider and swifter circles was soon the highest of the two. Giving a kind of scream of execration, the other one dropped its quarry in the air and made slowly off. The falcon darted down on the dead quail like an arrow, and secured it before it reached the ground. On another occasion, I saw a shepherd returning one evening with his flock of sheep, and on the back of one of them was seated a little bird, called in the bush the shepherd's companion (*Rhipidura motacillordes*) [Willie Wagtail] catching moths and flies; while so engaged one of these falcons came along with its usual velocity, picked the bird off the sheep's back, and flew to the top of a high tree where the poor fly-catcher was soon devoured. The motions of the hawk were so rapid that the eye could hardly follow them.

## NOTES ON THE ZOOLOGY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA. – No. IV.

By F. W. A.

The sparrowhawk is perhaps better known to my readers than any of the tribe of the hawks or falcons are, on account of its boldness in seizing and carrying off chickens, ducklings, or any young poultry that are about the farms or houses. And they will come so close to the house to secure the object of their prey that I have often seen on farms and sheepstations a gun loaded and kept in readiness in one corner of the kitchen or verandah ready to give any of these hawks a warm reception for daring to go so near the "busy haunts of man." This bird is the *accipiter torquatus* [Collared Sparrowhawk], so called from a lightish collar of reddish-brown feathers round the neck, all the upper part of the plumage is reddish-brown grey, the colors changing according to age. The female is about four inches longer than the male. What I wish to now draw particular attention to is, that another small hawk, the nankeen kestrel (*tinnunculus cenchroides*) is often shot and called sparrowhawk, whereas it is another bird altogether, and instead of looking after the chicks it is always on the look-out for grasshoppers, on which it feeds when they are obtainable. I have often examined the stomachs of these birds when shot, and never found them to contain anything else but grasshoppers, and other insects, small lizards, or sometimes mice. These hawks are good mousers. They are quite different in color and actions to the sparrowhawk, and I have often felt sorry to see these handsome and attractive little birds shot when their life would have been secure had their destroyer only possessed a small knowledge of natural history. They may easily be known by their habit of hovering in the air over any object they are seeking a favourable opportunity to seize on, when they suddenly make a rapid descent to the ground, and often eat what they have caught while stopping there. There is a well-known hawk in England, very similar, of which Waterton says, "Did the nurseryman, the farmer, and the country gentleman know the value of the kestrel's services, they would vie with each other in giving him a safe and secure retreat." The owls are also well known as being

good mousers. The masked owl, *strix personata* [Masked Owl], and the delicate owl, *strix delicata* [Barn Owl], are two good examples. They inhabit the thickly wooded and rocky parts of the colony, and are often seen about haystacks, to which they will make long visits after the mice. They have a harsh grating cry, which bears resemblance to the opossum, for which it is often mistaken when heard at a distance. The delicate owl is a very handsome bird, not quite so large as the other; it has handsome plumage; the underneath parts being white, delicately spotted. They prey on birds, rats, small lizards, &c., but mice are what they prefer to anything else. They lay two, sometimes more, eggs in a hollow tree or rock, and the young for some time look like balls of swansdown. The habits of both these owls are similar, but very few persons notice the difference, and take them to be the same. The masked owl has a very prominent fringe of feathers forming the ring of the mask. The natives in the Far North cut this fringe off, and form of it a ribbon-like ornament, which they fasten in their beard, and consider their personal appearance much improved thereby. I have observed the delicate owl much further north than the other. In the northern portions of the province and other parts of the colony where rats and other rodents are plentiful, these owls are pretty numerous, and their harsh cries may be heard all night long, frequently disturbing the traveller camping out. If one of them by accident is out in daylight it leads a harassing time of it until it can find some friendly tree to hide itself in, as all the small birds within hearing make to its whereabouts and treat it to a tuneful lecture on what they consider its obnoxious peculiarities. In fact, it is about the best-abused bird in the country. The winking owl (*athene connivens*) [Barking Owl] is a very fine species of the type of these birds, that can see and hunt by daylight if the day is not too sunny. I have seen them about the bends of the Murray River, where there are plenty of gum saplings growing, which afford a dark shady retreat for them during the day. I have observed

them kill birds in the morning, and retreat when the glare of the sun became too strong. I was once walking along a fine thick row of young gums, looking up carefully in these. I was espied by a “winker,” which dropped something close to me and flew to the top of a high gum tree not far away. I looked to see what had fallen at my feet, where lay a half-eaten native hen. Going to the tree where the owl sat, I could see its eyes glaring at me like two golden stars. I shot the bird, and it is now in the Museum.

**ERRATUM**

In the May newsletter the dates given for the Lewis Lake Eyre survey were given as 1844-45 but the correct dates are 1874-75.