

# *SAOA Historical Series No 51*

*Walter Cain, by Penny Paton*

## *Part Six*

For those of you with long memories, think back to February 2006 and Part 5 of the correspondence between John Sutton and Walter Cain. We thought then that this was the end of the letters that went back and forth from Adelaide to Port Augusta, but another batch has come to light so we continue the story. These letters are held privately and came from J Neil McGilp via Gordon Ragless, both notable egg collectors which may explain how they became separated from the original batch. Thanks are due to John Ragless, son of Gordon, for allowing the SAMA to photocopy this correspondence, and to Philippa Horton for access to the correspondence and for her editing skills. To recap, Walter Cain was born in Liverpool, was apprenticed to a joiner there and came to Australia in 1908, aged about 22. Around 1912 he began working for Fisher & Co., which was engaged in constructing the East West Railway, so Walter moved to Port Augusta and remained there for 38 years (Bradley 2004). His son Chris was a keen ornithologist who worked from a very young age on various properties belonging to Sir Sidney Kidman. Father and son were egg collectors and occasionally collected bird specimens for the South Australian Museum (SAMA). The present location of their oological Flinders Collection is unknown.

Sandy Bradley wrote up the first batch of letters and had got to Letters 100 (20 November 1937 from Walter Cain (WC) to John Sutton (JS)) and 101 (15 December 1937, from JS to WC). However there are three letters that should be before these two, dating from October 1937 (WC to JS) and November 1937 (JS to WC). The first letter from WC describes a visit to “the swamp and the Island”, presumably Seepage Swamp on the way to Lake Salmon based on previous letters and an article in the *SA Ornithologist* (Cain 1937) describing a visit there in Easter of 1937. Lake Salmon is at the bottom end of Lake Torrens and seems to fill only after good local rainfall; it is a few km W of Kallioota and about 60 km W of Hawker. On one island was a colony of Gull-billed Terns with one nest containing a single egg; on another island were breeding Silver Gulls. Other birds were a few pairs of Black-winged Stilt, “dotterel” and “plenty of duck”. Walter’s friend Mr Pearce had visited Western Australia and collected a set of “Narethae” Blue Bonnet eggs as well as a few young birds and saw both Princess and Scarlet-chested Parrots, which were not nesting. Walter’s other note of interest was a tree hollow near Kallioota containing four 3-week old Cockatiel and one young Galah about 10 days old — he mused on how such a circumstance would eventuate.

The second letter from WC reports that on squeezing the throat of a dead Goshawk [Brown Goshawk] out came about 5 inches of the head portion of a snake, which smelt very ripe, suggesting that the Goshawk consumed the snake some time after its death. This observation was written up in the *SA Ornithologist* (Anon. 1938). Later in the letter he laments the dearth of eggs this season and particularly the Gull-billed Terns that had been nesting, as previously noted. On a return trip there was no sign of the terns, but Silver Gulls had three nests on the island. Although he didn’t mention it in the first letter, he does say here that there were thousands of Black-tailed Native-Hens there on his previous visit – in fact he had never seen such a large number in one place before. This letter also picks up on the questioning of his Speckled Warbler record from Lake Salmon over Easter 1937, as published in the journal (Cain 1937). It now seems certain that this was a misidentification as there are no accepted records from this far west in South Australia. Cain is quite matter-of-fact over the matter and only sorry that he did not take a specimen at the time. In passing he tells Sutton that Chris is now with a shearing party at Wirrengulla, near Naracoorte, and will possibly meet up with Jack Hood (the subject of Historical Series #14).

Sutton’s customary courtesy is evident in his reply to these two letters; he tells Walter that his correspondence and valuable information are much appreciated and has obviously gone to considerable lengths to answer queries and check on facts, which he relays to WC. He also gives information on their mutual friends, namely that J. Neil McGilp has been unwell and housebound and so was unable to join Mr Parsons in search of the Mallee Whipbird and that their trip did not eventuate.

Continuing on now from where Sandy Bradley left off in Part 5, Walter writes to JS on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1938 with information on the nesting of the Gull-billed Terns but does not say where this occurred or when. It is most likely that it was at the Seepage Swamp where they were first seen in 1937. He believes that McGillivray’s six week period from hatching to flying is two weeks too long based on his observations in the field and with captive ternlets in Port Augusta. He also mentions that he believes that the “excreta balls” that some ornithologists believed were excreted by the terns were in fact vomited. He clearly sent some examples down to the Museum and Sutton’s reply of 23<sup>rd</sup> April agrees with this diagnosis. Sutton thanks him in advance for the Gull-billed Tern eggs and body, notes with interest the sighting of a pair of White-bellied Sea-Eagles at Lake Salmon from December

1937 - January 1938 and tells him that a tern skin he sent down was of a Marsh [now Whiskered] Tern. The Marsh Terns were observed by Cain for half an hour and were taking tadpoles from the water of a dam. With the letters is a list in JS's hand of terns recorded from Australian waters with identification features, which he presumably sent to WC to help out with his observing. We should remember that these country ornithologists were far from museums and libraries and usually reliant on Cayley and Leach – an unhappy situation as we older ornithologists well remember.

Walter writes again on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1938 noting Sutton's resignation as SAOA Secretary but his continuation on the Editorial Committee – he is very complimentary of JS's contributions. This letter relates the story of an Easter trip to Whittata Station (Seepage Swamp), Burgoyne Swamp, Canegrass Swamp (on the boundary of South Gap and Pernatty Stations) and Toby's Swamp. The most interesting observations were those that WC related second hand from Harold Opie, who was at Whittata Station. He claimed that a colony of Banded Stilts and Red-necked Avocets nested on Seepage Swamp (on the banks of the dam that was submerged by floodwaters forming two islands) in February 1937. In JS's reply (7<sup>th</sup> May 1938) he questions whether they were Banded and not Black-winged Stilts and wanted WC to follow this up with Opie, as it would have been only the fourth breeding record in Australia.

The next letter from WC (15<sup>th</sup> May 1938) suggests that JS write to Harold Opie re the Banded Stilts' nesting, noting that "he has a full quota of the 'Bushmans reserve' that you have to penetrate before you can do any good in obtaining information – I know that you will be tactful in approaching him". WC went on to tell JS that Opie had a copy of Cayley and showed Walter the bird on the plate. JS replied on 26<sup>th</sup> May saying that he had written to Mr Opie and posted a copy of the SAO Vol 10 Pt 2 which contains an account of the first breeding of the Banded Stilt in South Australia. Interestingly Harold Opie collected a set of Little Crow eggs from Whittata on 21/10/1932 that is in the collection of Museum Victoria (biocache website). There are also ten clutches of eggs collected by Opie in 1932 from the South Gap/Whittata area in the SAMA (P. Horton pers. comm.), so it seems that Harold was quite a knowledgeable birdo. As far as we know Opie did not reply to JS's letter and the record remains unconfirmed and not mentioned in Marchant and Higgins (1993).

On trying to find more information about Harold Opie, *The Advertiser* of 31<sup>st</sup> August 1938 revealed that W.H. Greenfield was the lessee of South Gap station, but the interesting note to me was that in 1920, there were 65 employees on South Gap and the school there had 24 pupils. So at one time some of these stations were large businesses and bigger than some country towns. Whittata was clearly a smaller concern, at least by 1938, as WC's letter of 1<sup>st</sup> July explains the difficulties of dealing with

bush blokes by reason of their spending so much time alone.

The April letter from WC ends with a mention of Chris writing out details of their egg collection (called by them the Flinders Collection – presumably because they were close to the Flinders Ranges) and indeed a copy by number of bird is in the correspondence (copied out by species in JS's neat hand). There are 352 species represented on the list, some of which were collected by the Cains and others obtained through swapping with other collectors. JS acknowledges the wonderful work they have done with their collection in his 26<sup>th</sup> May letter and queries just one species – the Eastern Curlew eggs, for as far as JS knows their eggs have never been found. He offers WC some eggs in exchange for his Gull-billed Tern eggs.

In WC's reply (14<sup>th</sup> June 1938) he tells JS that the curlew eggs came from Collins (an egg collector from Edenhope, Victoria) and were collected at Rochdale in England. He added that Mr McGilp had also questioned these eggs on viewing the collection. JS confirmed (26<sup>th</sup> June) that if the eggs were collected at Rochdale then they would refer to a different species of curlew (*Numenius arquata* not *cyanopus* – now *madagascariensis*).

In relation to data with eggs, WC's letter of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1938 queries whether the Museum has Mal Murray's egg collection; WC believes that W. Gigney of Wirrabara collected for Murray in a paid capacity. WC has met Gigney and thinks him "a decent chap". He also laments that JS has not heard from Opie, and admits that bush blokes are hard to deal with, but he is hopeful of seeing him at the races in Port Augusta shortly and will query him then. Sutton's reply (10<sup>th</sup> July) admits that the Museum does not have Murray's collection, as it is with his son J.T. Murray, formerly a state cricketer who is on a property at Woodside. SAMA does have Malcolm Murray's egg collection of about 660 clutches now. The eggs were mainly collected from the Wirrabara and Leigh Creek areas between 1884 and 1899. *The Advertiser* of 6<sup>th</sup> July 1898 refers to Malcolm Murray as late of Myrtle Springs Station and now of Wirrabara.

In a second letter from JS to WC on the same day (10<sup>th</sup> July), JS queries another record, contained in WC's letter of 30<sup>th</sup> April which details the reporting of two nests of the Squatter Pigeon on Whittata by Opie and a nest on Pernatty by French. JS points out that this species is not recorded for the state and suggests that it may be the Spinifex Pigeon. He also alerts WC to incorrect numbers in the first edition of Cayley – Banded Stilt was 21 on the Plate and 20 in the letter press and Red-necked Avocet was 22 on the Plate and 21 on the letter press. He clearly thought that this may have led to a misidentification by Opie. JS's next letter (13<sup>th</sup> July) asks WC about a title for his article that is to appear in the *SA Ornithologist* and to the naming of Seepage Swamp. WC confirms that the name Seepage Swamp relates to two different swamps,

one on Whittata and one near Lake Salmon. This article was published in the *SA Ornithologist*, Volume 14 Part 7 (Cain 1938).

Walter replies (17<sup>th</sup> July) that Mr Opie had pointed out the Squatter Pigeon in Cayley and that the Frenches on Pernatty had also seen them. He recommends that JS write to the Frenches and JS has pencilled in their address on this letter (W.D. French Pernatty Station via Port Augusta) and his later letter (of 19<sup>th</sup> August) confirms that he did write. However as Squatter Pigeons have not been recorded in South Australia, I wonder if it may have been the Flock Bronzewing, which would also have been a very southerly record for the state. WC's letter of 13<sup>th</sup> September pursues this theme as he, Chris and Mr Pearce went to Whittata and with Mr Opie found a 'Squatter Pigeon' nest, found the previous day by Opie. Unfortunately the bird on the nest flew away and despite hours of searching the bird was not located. By this time the eggs in the nest were cold. He describes the nest and eggs:

Nest in a growing low samphire, eggs laid on a few dead samphire twigs on the bare ground no depression egg measurements 1<sup>3/8</sup> " x 1" Incubation 4/10 eggs creamy white with dull opalised gloss.

Photographs were taken of the nest and eggs and WC promised to send these to JS if they turned out. WC does not mention here that the eggs were taken but at the end of the letter he tells JS that apart from a set of a Rufous Fieldwren and Chestnut-crowned Babbler eggs, the "Squatter Pigeon" eggs were the only ones taken.

JS (19<sup>th</sup> September) throws cold water on the "Squatter Pigeon" theory as the location is so far from any other records to that date, being in Queensland, Northern Territory and western New South Wales. The egg measurements compare well with the Squatter Pigeon's, but JS notes that they also fit the Flock Pigeon's but that that species nests in a depression in the ground. JS had written to French but "the inhabitants of the 'great silent spaces of the interior' seem to keep likewise!" That is, he had not had a reply. WC did not let the mystery pigeon go and, in his letter to JS of 9<sup>th</sup> October 1938, he tells JS that Prim Whyte [manager of Yadlamalka] had seen two Squatter Pigeons on Yadlamalka on the Tablelands. Yadlamalka is about 50 km due north of Port Augusta.

JS's letter of 19<sup>th</sup> August 1938 begins on a more personal note, advising that he had suffered a bilious attack brought on by eating two of his favourite dishes, that have now been crossed of his menu, much to his disgust. He also conveyed to Walter that the trophy presented anonymously by WC had been awarded to a schoolgirl on Eyre Peninsula and that Mr Ashby was the judge. JS had read the winning entry too and obviously was not impressed as it seemed to have been copied verbatim from text books, although he admitted that at least the species were present on the Peninsula. Also present in the

correspondence pile is a typed letter from Alfred Edquist of the Education Department to JS (12<sup>th</sup> July 1938) advising him of the winner of the 'jewel case' offered for competition by the anonymous donor.

WC replies to this letter almost immediately (21<sup>st</sup> August) commiserating on the illness and foregoing of favourite foods and then gets down to business. He has been asked by Mr Minchin, Director of the Adelaide Zoo, to obtain live Freckled Ducks, but doesn't hold out much hope of being able to do this in the limited leisure time he has. He has packed one duck egg and sent it to JS; it was collected by a boy with a donkey team who was "doing up the banks" (presumably of dams). The donkey teamsters found lots of duck nests last year in the canegrass and dined on many. WC is hopeful that JS will be able to identify the species by comparing it with those in the SAMA collection. WC goes on to ask JS if he thinks Mr McGilp would like his second set of Ground Cuckoo-shrike eggs that McGilp had admired on a viewing of the Flinders Collection.

JS replies to both of WC's August and September letters on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1938, suggesting that the single duck egg did not belong to the Freckled Duck but did compare well with the Blue-billed Duck. He also warns WC that if he is to take any Freckled Duck eggs or young for the Zoo, even if it was in the open season, that he should request them to get him a permit to do so.

WC writes again (23<sup>rd</sup> September) very disappointed that he couldn't get a specimen of the "Squatter Pigeon" but still believing that this was the species. He has not seen the Blue-billed Duck up that way, but when he and Chris were working a canegrass swamp they found more similar duck nests, lots of Little Grassbirds and Zebra Finches nesting and a very pale Swamp Harrier. At Burgoyne they caught one Musk Duck duckling, which they sent to Mr Minchin. WC will send the Ground Cuckoo-shrike set down for Mr McGilp, so obviously he was keen to receive this for his collection,

WC also gives information about Chris's birding endeavours; he was at a place that looks like 'Corrobie' but I cannot locate this in my gazetteer. He was gratified to get a set of Turquoise Wren eggs with a Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo egg as well. WC tells JS that Jack Hood got a boost to his collection through Collins as E. Simpson was disbanding his collection, barring the birds of prey.

On 5<sup>th</sup> October JS tells WC that his cuckoo-shrike eggs have arrived safely and that he is sending in exchange 2 Blue-billed Duck eggs, that were in Dr Morgan's collection, but that his data book showed that they were collected by Captain White in 1909. This discovery was apparently written up in *The Emu*. JS also informs WC that the feathers found in a fieldwren nest were those of a Little Button-quail.

In WC's last letter to JS (9<sup>th</sup> October 1938) as well as mentioning the sighting of the Squatter Pigeons as mentioned above, he mentions George Pearce's prowess at fox shooting, not for the first time. George, who drove the delivery truck for the Commonwealth Railways (*The Advertiser* 5/12/1934), had taken over 2000 foxes from the Gap and Pernatty Stations in one year and, during weekend trips to Yadlamalka, bagged 800 in three months. WC was making the point to JS that with this level of fox control, numbers of ground nesting birds (like the Squatter Pigeon) would increase. He goes on to describe a trip to Kallioota sarcastically as "a wonderful trip .... I came home with so many Bathurst Burrs and Bindihis (sic) in my anatomy I didn't know if I was a Hedgehog or an Echidna". The conditions there were very dry and few birds were nesting. The only eggs collected were a set of the White-browed Babbler. The rainfall from 1 July to early October was just over an inch and it was over 100<sup>0</sup> F with a dust storm the week before, and not a drop of rain afterwards.

This concludes the correspondence between WC and JS, as Sutton fell ill in late October and died on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1938 (Horton 2014). There is a footnote to this series of correspondence: two letters, one from JS to J Neil McGilp and a reply from McGilp, both written on the same day – 20<sup>th</sup> October 1938. Sutton wrote about two matters, the first regarding the Cains. He described the nests found in canegrass, detailed in WC's 23<sup>rd</sup> September letter, and the possible Blue-billed Duck egg found by the donkey team boy and wondered if McGilp could assign the nests to a duck species. JS also comments on the Mallee Whipbird saga that was apparently playing out in the press and in ornithological circles at this time. He mentions an article in *The Age* of 14/10/38 in which the Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game in Victoria was urging his South Australian counterpart not to issue permits for specimens of the whipbird to enhance the species' chance of survival. In a P.S. JS tells McGilp that "the Melbourne Mallee Whip-bird arrived yesterday" so it seems that the SAMA had already received one specimen, at least on exchange.

McGilp replies, perhaps half-jokingly, that "Walter Cain certainly gives you plenty of problems" (could this be a reference to the Squatter Pigeon affair?). He thinks that Blue-billed Duck is the most likely candidate although the nest seems too small for that species. He goes on to say that in his opinion a few whipbirds taken for scientific purposes was unlikely to make much difference to the species. This belief would be shared by most today as, in hindsight, habitat destruction and fragmentation have been greater threat to species' survival than specimens taken for scientific study.

It is clear from the many letters written between Walter Cain and John Sutton that a real affection had built up between the two men. In a mark of his esteem for a man of great physical and personal stature, Walter made a memorial tablet using 44 Australian timbers, which in

March 1939 he donated to the Museum, where it remains to this day in the Bird Section (Horton 2014).

#### References

Anon. 1938. Food of Birds. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 14: 177.

Bradley, Sandy. 2004. SAOA Historical Series No. 11, Walter Cain (Cont.). *Birds SA Newsletter* No. 192 December 2004: i-iv.

Cain, Walter. 1937. A trip to Lake Salmon, S.A. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 14: 96-99.

Cain, Walter 1938. Holiday notes on north-western swamps. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 14: 185-187.

Horton, Philippa. 2014. SAOA Historical Series No. 50, John Sutton – a biography, Part 4. *Birds SA Newsletter* No. 232 November 2014: i-iv.

Marchant, S. & P.J.Higgins (Eds). 1993. Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Volume 2: raptors to lapwings. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

#### Sources

Photocopies of letters from J Sutton and Walter Cain held in SAMA

<http://biocache.ala.org.au/occurrences/6031fd21-8ada-4caa-bd3b-3008c8abdca>

Trove: scanned newspapers available on the Trove website: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/74389341>  
[The Advertiser](http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/54396291) 31/8/1938  
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/54396291> *The Advertiser* 6/7/1898  
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/35023394> *The Advertiser* 5/12/1934

#### Penny Paton