

SAOA Historical Series No 52

John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes

by Penny Paton — Part One

The South Australian Museum (SAMA) holds a great deal of material from John Sutton (Historical Series Nos 1, 44, 45, 49 and 50), including letters, diaries and notebooks and Philippa Horton has kindly made available notes that Sutton made on trips to Outer Harbor between 26th April 1930 and 13th April 1935 (Horton 2013). These trips were weekly or almost so over these five years, generally on a Saturday, and, as well as the accounts written out in pencil for each visit, there is a summary notebook which lists all bird species seen and numbers of birds of each species against each date. Apart from the occasional unusual bird species, these records are not published in the *South Australian Ornithologist* or anywhere else.

On his first visit, Sutton caught the 11.05 train (presumably from the Adelaide Railway Station), changing at Glanville and arriving at Outer Harbor at 11.55. On all subsequent visits he always caught the train, but not always at the same time. He took a great interest in the various ships that were at the dock, their cargo and their comings and goings and always noted these. For example on the 26th April 1930 he saw the 'Chitral', 'Esperance Bay' and the 'Katoomba'. Outer Harbor was developed as a facility for loading and unloading ships in 1908, due to the difficulties of accessing the Port Adelaide docks via the Port River. Much of the extreme northern end of the Le Fevre Peninsula was sand dunes and samphire until the development of North Haven in the 1970s.

An 1883 map of Le Fevre Peninsula (Figure 1) gives some indication of the terrain and vegetation there at this time and it is likely that the northern and eastern portions remained fairly much the same at least until the 1930s when Sutton was conducting his surveys.



Fig 1, Port Adelaide 1883
Details on page iv.

The western shore and the central portion were altered considerably by 1930 due to the construction of the railway to Outer Harbor, the Yacht Squadron and the port facilities. In 1883 the northern end of the peninsula was described as "swampy land", with "soft mud" at the tip; there was a fringe of mangroves along the eastern (Port

River) shoreline and "hard sand uncovered at low water" on the western (ocean) shore, north of the "proposed ocean dock".

A Nautical Chart of Port Adelaide from 1911 (Figure 2, page iii) gives a little more detail, showing "mangroves and mud intersected by numerous creeks" along the Port River shoreline and in the centre of the peninsula "swampy land overflowed by high tides".

Over the first few visits, Sutton firmed up what became his usual route, walking along the western end of the pier or wharf, then the eastern end, before going north past the clubhouse of the South Australian Yacht Squadron (SAYS) and checking out the birds in the little bay on its right. He proceeded to the tip of the Le Fevre Peninsula via Pelican Point and Snapper Point and then turned south to walk along the shoreline of the Port River. He mentions place names that are not on any maps and may have been his own names for features he regularly passed and these include the fishermen's huts, fishermen's beach (presumably close to the huts), the reef and the claypan. On 24th May 1930, Sutton describes seeing some Double-banded Dotterels on the Y.C. [Yacht Club] fishermen's beach, so I am assuming that this may have been the little bay on the right of SAYS. The revetment mounds are mentioned on occasion and I am confident that these were in the same position as they are now.

The notes for some days have the tide information from the newspaper pinned to them but, where these clippings are absent, Sutton wrote them at the top left of page one. So he was clearly cognisant of the connection between high tides and wader numbers, but his visits did not necessarily coincide with high tides, probably because of the needs of family life and train and tram timetables. On just his second visit, on 3rd May 1930, he notes ruefully that "As regards migratory waders it was a regular dud – not one being seen or heard"; this visit was in the middle of the day and the high tides were 7.07am and 7.18pm.

Over the years from 1930 to 1935, Sutton recorded 84 species of birds as well as a few birds only identified to group or genus, like woodswallows and *Porzana* species. As one would expect given the terrain, the majority of birds were waterbirds, including cormorants, terns, gulls, waders and a few ducks and seabirds. I will describe in detail the bird species seen on the first few trips, with a précis of or quotes from John's notes to give the flavour of his observations and pick out the highlights thereafter.

One Fairy Tern and 955 Silver Gulls were seen on his first trip, on 26th April 1930, with some of the gulls being seen on or around the steamers. Thirty-one Eastern Curlew fed on a reef off the Port River shoreline and 3 Pied Oystercatcher were with them for a time. "A few [curlews] seemed to be in good condition but the majority were thin in comparison with the fat ones". Sutton observed one bird with a bad leg, which he christened "limpy", and this could explain why this particular bird was over-wintering in Australia. The only other waders noted were 2 Greenshank, 2 Red-necked Stint, 7 Red-capped Dotterel [Plover] and 1 White-faced Heron. Nine neophema parrots were seen in the samphire (identified on a subsequent visit as Rock Parrot), and a few Willie Wagtail, Singing Honeyeater, Pipit, Welcome Swallow and White-fronted Chat, and 1 White-backed Magpie rounded off the day.

As we know, he saw no waders on 3rd May and, apart from 1 Little Pied Cormorant, the other birds were much the same as the previous trip. The 10th May provided similar waterbirds with the addition of 3 Crested Terns on a sandspit on the western side and 1 Sooty Oystercatcher associating with 5 Pied Oystercatcher. A fairly quiet day on 17th May, but Sutton did see two neophema parrots that were not Rock Parrots (probably Elegant), as well as a Pied Cormorant. Sutton's first record of Double-banded Dotterel [Plover] was on 24th May, with 2 birds being seen on the YC fishermen's beach and another 15 on the claypan. He also had his first sighting of the "dark thornbill" – 5 birds in samphire close to the shoreline that gave little chance of close observation. We now know that these were the Slender-billed Thornbill, once known as the Samphire Thornbill. Similar species were observed on 31st May, but only one curlew (limpy) and 2 Double-banded Plover, one with two narrow breast bands and the other with only one band.

Sutton's 7th June outing coincided well with a high tide and he was rewarded with larger than usual counts of some waders – 8 Greenshank, 27 Red-necked Stint and 71 Red-capped Dotterel (Plover). Most of the red-caps were on the drying claypan in company with the stints and 16 Double-banded Plover. Two of the last-named were "in perfect breeding plumage – showing the white lores, the thin black band and then the rich chestnut band which appeared two to three times larger than the black one. They looked beautiful." The other notable sighting for this day was 27 "dark thornbills" – "Just as I was getting into the samphire I heard the call & over 25 flew past me in very scattered formation. about 20 feet up to just above the samphire, shortly after they broke up and I saw two lots of 8 and 6 flew past me. On alighting on a samphire they go right into it & rarely sit on a shrub for longer than a few seconds."

Sutton had another productive day on June 9th, with 46 Red-capped Plover, 41 Double-banded Plover and 23 Red-necked Stint on the claypan. Also 28 curlew were seen, including limpy, "in the usual position & in a line with the front of the Y.C. House." In addition he saw 42

thornbills "in little flocks of 9, 12, 4, 6, 2, & 9. in the samphire I got very close to them & had good views. As usual they only flew a little distance ahead & flushed almost singly(?) as I moved on to them." This was the most Slender-billed Thornbills that Sutton recorded in a single day in his five years of observations.

On 14th June Sutton varied his travel a little, by catching a train to the Port Adelaide Dock station and then walking to the Commercial Road Station to catch the Outer Harbor train. He observed 30 Double-banded Plover, with 28 of them on the claypan, with 38 stint and 20 red-caps. While watching some oystercatchers, Sutton looked up and saw a flock of large birds flying in from the northeast at 300-400 feet up; as they approached closer they were identified as 24 curlew. Later in the day they were on a sandbank near the Yacht Squadron Clubhouse, which turned into an island at high tide. Often Sutton recorded cormorants (obviously too far away to distinguish the species) on the revetment mounds and on this day there were 82 there.

On his next visit (21st June) Sutton observed 3 Caspian Tern on the shore at Mangrove Bay (Port River shore) along with Silver Gulls and 16 Crested Terns. Fourteen Fairy Terns were seen, 3 of which were flying, and the remainder were with gulls on a sandbank near the Yacht Squadron Clubhouse. In addition there were 37 Double-banded Plover, 4 curlew (including limpy), 12 Greenshank, 14 White-faced Heron, 14 Rock Parrot and 22 "dark thornbills".

The notes for 28th June include some names for locations on the river shore/Torrens Island side of the Le Fevre Peninsula. Sutton wrote: "The Sandbank off Torrens Is side is "North Bank", the next one further north is "Section Bank". Little Blue Hole and Blue Hole are northward of that then the further point is called "Longspit". Port Gawler is near the end of the Big Gums of the Para River. Buckland Park homestead is shown by the Pinus insignis around it. St Kilda is straight across from Pelican Point, & over the end of the island (Torrens?)." At the end of these notes is a comment that a Nankeen Night Heron was seen further on the Pelican Point shore, but curiously this species is not included in the summary document. On 28th July Sutton commented that three ketches carrying barley were anchored off the northern end of the wharf ("Storm Bird", "Tickera" and "Hawk") and that these were waiting for the arrival of the steamers which would receive the grain and presumably take it overseas.

The high tide on 5th July coincided with Sutton's arrival and there was water at the eastern end of the claypan and a lot of water in the mangroves and southwards from Mangrove Bay. Pelicans were seen for the first time – 3 birds in Mangrove Bay, which flew towards St Kilda. Other sightings included 104 stint, 52 curlew and a Nankeen Kestrel hovering near Osborne. A Grey Shrike-thrush, first seen on 9th June, was heard on this visit near Mangrove Bay.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Philippa Horton for editing this first part of Sutton's Outer Harbor notes, which will continue in Part 2.

References and Sources

Horton, P. 2013. SAOA Historical Series No 45. John Sutton – a biography, Part 2. *Birds SA Newsletter* No 227 August 2013: iii.

<http://mapco.net/aust.htm>

<http://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/PRG+280/1/44/665>

Details of Figure 1

Full Title:	Port Adelaide H.W.F. & C. IVh. 40m. Spr. rise 8½ feet. Soundings in ft. at L.W.
Publisher:	E.Spiller, Government Printer, North-Terrace, Adelaide. H.B. Lith.
Date:	1883. (Inscription to Title Page of 17 November 1883)
Source:	South Australia: Its History, Productions, And Natural Resources, By. J.P. Stow. Written For The Calcutta Exhibition, By request of the South Australian Government.
Size:	15cm x 21cm (6" x 8¼")
Scale:	Approx 1.4" : 1 Statute Mile
Extent:	Inner Bar - North Arm - Port Adelaide - Outer Bar
Description:	Folding engraved plan on paper, included in Stow's "South Australia", published for the 1883 Calcutta Exhibition.

<http://mapco.net/aust.htm>