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John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes

by Penny Paton — Part Three

I now have all of Sutton's notes from Outer Harbor (from April 1930 to April 1935) so will be more methodical in my treatment than I have been thus far. As mentioned in Part 1 (Paton 2015a) Sutton recorded 84 species of birds and a few others only identified to genus or group over these five years. The unusual occurrence of giant petrels in July and August 1930 has been dealt with in Part 2 (Paton 2015b). There is an addendum to this story – on 18th August 1934 Sutton made his only other sighting of a giant petrel but clearly a different bird from those seen in 1930, as this was all white. When John Sutton arrived at Outer Harbor on the 18th August three employees of the Harbor Board told him that a “white booby” had been seen in the swinging basin at the wharf that morning. One of the men said that he had seen a black one also. Shortly after, Sutton saw the white bird near the northern end of the revetment, firstly flying and later in the water, apparently feeding. At times Silver Gulls attacked the petrel. Later Sutton said that the petrel and gulls were feeding amongst refuse thrown overboard from the ‘Strathnaver’ (an ocean liner of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P & O)). One of the men indicated that the petrel had dark spots on its body, including a large blackish spot on its left breast, just like the bird he had previously noticed on 7th August. The Southern Giant Petrel has a white morph with occasional brown spots on its body feathers so this confirms the identity of this petrel.

Sutton reported only one other species of tubenose Outer Harbor from 1930-35 and this was the Yellow-nosed Albatross (now called the Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross). On 21st October 1933 Sutton collected the body of a recently-dead albatross of this species “near the trestle near the Old Tank”. Dr Morgan subsequently confirmed that it was a juvenile bird. Another bird likewise more typical of offshore areas recorded by Sutton was the Australasian Gannet. Only one bird was seen on one day at Outer Harbor – on a very cold and windy 29th July 1933 Sutton saw a bird diving into the sea just off the north entrance to the basin. He could make out black on the wings but the identity was confirmed when he spoke to a fisherman who said he had seen a buffish head and neck on a bird that was diving frequently into the water. Mr Justice, another employee of the Harbor Board, had also mentioned seeing a similar bird the previous week beyond the end of the eastern revetment.

While Sutton did not see them, large numbers of Short-tailed Shearwaters were observed at Outer Harbor and

along the entire South Australian coast on 1st May 1933 (Sutton 1933). Mr Justice described it thus, relayed by Sutton (1933):

“[Mr Justice] saw on his arrival there by train at 7.10a.m., immense numbers of these birds flying over the sea, and extending as far out, as could be observed, at a height of about 15 feet above the water, with about the same distance between each bird. All were flying in a westerly direction.... At 7 30 a.m. the flight was still going on westerly over the sea and many birds as well were then flying over the land of the harbor promontory... At 8.30 a.m. the flock had dwindled down to stragglers flying westerly. He considered there must have been hundreds of thousands in the flock, and during the 29 years he has been at Outer Harbor he has not witnessed such a sight before. Two other persons confirmed the occurrence of the flight, and reckoned there must have been millions of birds.”

Cormorants did not seem to excite John Sutton as he records their species and number but rarely with any comments. He often saw a few Little Pied Cormorants, generally one to three birds and never more than seven, except on a threatening day in a very wet week, 18th June 1932, when about 50 birds were located on the north bank shore not far from the mangroves. As they flew towards Pelican Point they caught sight of a shoal of fish and descended into the water where they fished with Silver Gulls and Crested Terns. Sightings of Little Black Cormorants were less frequent but numbers were more variable and occasionally quite large. After not seeing any of this species over the first 14 months of observation, Sutton saw largish flocks over the next two months. The largest was of 103 birds on 25th July 1931, fishing in Fisherman's Bay, at Pelican Point and later near the Yacht Squadron clubhouse. A professional fisherman told Sutton that these birds “come at times and are demons on young mullet”. Few birds were seen until another spike of large flocks in August 1932. This time the largest flock was 200 birds, which were flushed from the Fisherman's Bay side (i.e. the Port River side) of Pelican Point. Later that month a flock of 175 was feeding with gulls in Fisherman's Bay. Again sightings were few for the rest of Sutton's observation period, with a couple of medium-sized flocks, again in August – 49 birds in August 1933 and 28 in August 1934.

Pied Cormorants were seen in smallish numbers on about half the visits that Sutton made to Outer Harbor but there

were periods of several months when none were sighted, particularly in 1933 and 1934. Numbers seen were generally less than ten and always less than 22, despite this species breeding in the near vicinity. Pied Cormorants nested in small numbers at Port Gawler in 1935 and at Outer Harbor on the No. 0 Back Lead Beacon, A.G.A. Light (Condon 1935). Mr Justice, that intrepid and observant man, noticed two nests there in 1931, 12 nests in 1933 but no nests in 1932. Condon visited the site on 26th May 1934, along with Sutton and Mr Justice, who took them out there in the Harbor Board launch. They discovered 17 nests on the beacon. Two nests contained eggs (one or two) and others had young ranging from newly-born to fully-feathered.

Condon and Rix (1936) describe two visits to the "Shaggery" in the mangroves near Port Gawler where a large breeding colony of Pied Cormorants was situated. On the first visit on 5th June 1935, made by Condon and D.W. Brummitt, they estimated that there were about 80 nests and young at all stages. The second visit, made by Condon and a young Bob Brown, was on 14th June 1936, by which time there were about 200 nests and 250 young birds. A few egg and skin specimens from these visits are in the SA Museum collection.

The rarest of all the cormorants was the Great Cormorant; single birds were seen on only five occasions - 30th August 1930, 4th April, 20th June and 4th July 1931, and 24th November 1934. On every visit Sutton saw up to several hundred cormorants that were too far away to be identified. Sutton did not record the Black-faced Cormorant, which seems surprising, particularly in light of the fact that they have been breeding on the revetment at Outer Harbor at least since 1967 (Condon 1968).

Grebes were rarely recorded in the first couple of years, with five Hoary-headed Grebes on 9th July 1932 near White Beach in the Port River, four in a similar location on 20th August and one near the Yacht Club on 27th August. Eight unidentified small grebes were seen off White Beach mouth on 6th May 1933 and one was off the mouth of the "first creek" on 15th July 1933. Then from late April till late November 1934 Hoary-headed Grebe were seen on almost every visit, usually 1-10 birds but an astounding 38 on 30th August. A few of these birds were in the Yacht Club basin (where they had been seen before), a few were near Beacon No 3 and the rest were in pairs or small flocks further up the river on both sides as far as the "Explosives mound". After November 1934 only a single Hoary-headed Grebe was seen on 6th April 1935.

Apart from a few flocks of 10 and 14 birds in 1931, Pelicans were generally uncommon and in small numbers when they were present. A few birds were seen on every visit in July and early August 1930, including one bird that was magnified by the mirage and "seemed as big as an ostrich". This is in keeping with Condon and Rix's (1936) observations at nearby Buckland Park, where they

were recorded in small numbers on three occasions, the largest number being 12 on 9th February 1936.

Four species of terns were recorded by Sutton at Outer Harbor, the rarest being the Whiskered Tern, with only two sightings over the five years. The first was a single bird on 12th January 1933, "flying about the shallow water, between the stone embankment & the sand-shore on the sea side....It went down in the shallow water sometimes going beneath the surface." The other record was also in 1933 and again a single bird, which was flying up and down in the weedy portion of Fisherman's Bay on 11th November. This species was described as "Common from August to December, especially in 1935" at Buckland Park by Condon and Rix (1936).

The next rarest tern was the Caspian Tern, seen generally in numbers of less than ten, except between February and April 1931 when up to 21 were seen regularly. Numbers of Caspian Terns declined markedly, with sightings becoming much less common after early 1933. The changes in numbers may have been partly due to real changes in their occurrence at Outer Harbor but it is also possible that it is partly an artefact of the time that Sutton left the harbor. From late January to late April 1931 he stayed out much later - sometimes till 6pm - and his notes indicate that he often saw the larger number of Caspian Terns late in the afternoon. Condon and Rix (1936) note "Occasionally seen on the sea-shore in flocks of up to twelve."

Crested Terns were seen on the majority of visits and sometimes in large numbers; the highest number ever recorded by Sutton was 266 birds on 15th October 1930. These were not all in one flock and were distributed in several places including a sandbank on the ocean shore, on rocks on the western revetment, on the river shore and near Mangrove Bay, but by far the biggest number was on a sandbank in front of the Yacht Squadron. On 14th February 1931 Sutton noted that, of the flock of less than twenty birds flying past him at Mangrove Bay, some were young birds making a light whistling call, whereas the adults called a harsh "Karru". Numbers stayed quite consistent throughout the observation period from 1930 to 1935 and some larger numbers were seen towards the end, e.g. 223 were seen on 6th October 1934, including a flock of 214 on the seashore. Again on 10th November 1934 a flock of 194 was on the seashore and a total of 189 were seen on 1st December 1934.

Fairy Terns showed a strongly annual pattern to their presence and abundance at Outer Harbor from 1930 to 1935, with larger numbers in late autumn through early spring and very few sightings and low numbers from mid-September to mid-March. In 1930 they were completely absent in this period whereas in later years there were a few sightings of a handful of birds. Presumably the majority of the population moved to offshore islands to breed. Numbers of Fairy Terns varied from one or two up to 39 (20th May 1933) and 34 (on two occasions - 5th July 1930 and 12th May 1934). Many of the sightings that

Sutton made were of birds resting on the sandbank in front of the Yacht Squadron clubhouse. However they were also seen at Fisherman's Bay, Pelican Point, White Beach and fishing over the water. On 21st July 1934 Sutton noted 28 Fairy Terns, of which "5 ... were 'working' a claypan in the samphire." Crested and Fairy Terns were presumably common enough for Condon and Rix (1936) to simply list them without further comment.

Silver Gulls were easily the most numerous bird species recorded by Sutton at Outer Harbor. Counts for the day rarely dropped below 100 birds and sometimes climbed over 1000 birds. Highest numbers were recorded in all years over the months of February, March and April, presumably reflecting an influx of young into the population after the spring breeding period. In fact on Sutton's first visit to the harbor on 26th April 1930 he describes most of the gulls as being around or on various ships, with many of them being immature birds. On some days Sutton accurately counted the number of gulls seen during his visit and then commented as he was leaving that there were more birds than he had counted resting on the shores at high tide. On most days Sutton simply gives the total number of Silver Gulls seen with no additional comment and Condon and Rix (1936) are similarly silent.

There were only a few records of Pacific Gull at Outer Harbor, most often one bird, occasionally two and once there were five. Most of the sightings were from summer and autumn but there were some records from winter (two birds on 4th August 1934, one to two birds regularly through June and July 1931, and two birds on 30th July 1932). Condon and Rix (1936) only recorded Pacific Gulls on one occasion, when three immature birds were seen on the beach on 16th February 1935. Sutton (1935) wrote a short paper on the Pacific Gull, which mentions an immature male bird collected by Condon from Port Gawler on the above-mentioned date. Sutton (1935) also lists all the places in South Australia where Pacific Gulls have been recorded and includes Outer Harbor and Port Gawler as well as other locations on the southern Fleurieu Peninsula, Kangaroo Island, Yorke Peninsula and Eyre Peninsula. He also reports breeding from Nepean Bay and Stokes Bay on Kangaroo Island, Pearson Island and A.B.C. Islands in Venus Bay.

Sutton's first records of Pacific Gulls were: on 7th February 1931 one immature, on 14th February there were five in immature plumage, one on 21st February, an adult was there on 28th February, two immatures on 7th March and an adult on 21st March. So during these two months in 1931 there were at least six different birds at Outer Harbor. The next group of records are from later in 1931: 30th May, one immature bird; 20th June, two birds in adult plumage; 27th June, one bird; 11th July, two birds; 18th July, one bird in adult plumage and 25th July, one bird. In subsequent years there were fewer sightings, all but one of these was of single birds and they were much more sporadic. It seems that this is one species that has increased in South Australia, at least close to major urban centres.

There are only two records of skuas in Sutton's records. The first was an Arctic Skua (now called Arctic Jaeger) seen on 21st March 1931. "The bird was flying about in the Harbour between the wharf & the western revetment. It was flying up and down close to the water & sometimes higher up, 30 to 40 feet. It dropped down on the water and stayed there for some time, the trough of the waves hiding it at times. I saw it attack a Silver Gull then a Gull chased it & about 4 times after there was a kind of stand-up fight between it & a Gull, they rose & fell in unison but no blows were struck as they were about a foot to 15 inches off one another." On this day there was such wild weather that the 'Orford' had difficulty in berthing at Outer Harbor and Sutton pinned a newspaper clipping to his notes with a photo of the 'Orford' and its two tugs struggling to bring her in. This clipping described the unseasonably cold weather, with hail falling in many parts of South Australia and strong southerly winds. Sutton does not overtly make a connection between this weather and the presence of the Arctic Skua, but his placement of the news clipping may indicate that he thought there was a connection.

The second skua observed by Sutton he called *Catharacta lonnbergi*, which is a species that seems to have a very vexed taxonomy with various common names, e.g. Brown Skua, Antarctic Skua, Southern Great Skua and Southern Skua (*Stercorarius antacticus*). Sutton observed four birds on 29th July 1933, describing them thus:

"Dark southern Skua 4 – I saw 2 pairs just south of the bow of the Oronsay, at first about 150 yards separated the two pairs. On food being thrown out from the Oronsay the whole? birds flew towards the steamer when I saw them first later 2 then 3 did so. At no time did I see them attack the gulls. I ? that underneath the wing & halfway along there was a whitish ridge & on two I saw a whitish mark near the bastard wing, ? The tail was wedge shaped. The head, neck, was coffee brown, tail almost black, bill blackish. On one bird there were cuts(?) on the extended wings."

Sutton described the weather on this day as "Very cold with a very strong SW wind", which may explain the presence inshore of the usually pelagic skuas. This was the same day that he observed the Australasian Gannet, mentioned earlier in this part.

Of all the birds that he observed at Outer Harbor, Sutton was clearly most interested in the waders, perhaps due to the fact that they were less easily observed and thus he was not as knowledgeable about them as he was about other groups. Twenty-one species of wader were seen plus a few birds that were not identified to species (e.g. see my comment about a possible Lesser or Greater Sand Plover, Paton 2015b). Of the non-migratory waders, those most regularly reported were the two oystercatchers. Pied Oystercatchers were much more common than the Sooty, no doubt due to the latter's liking for rocky shores. Up to 30 Pied Oystercatchers were seen on one occasion, but numbers fewer than 10 birds were more common. They



The newspaper clipping that Sutton pinned to his notes

were seen on about two-thirds of his trips over the five years. From Sutton's comment on the locations of the Pied Oystercatchers they seemed to be more often in Fisherman's Bay on the river side of the peninsula, but they were seen on the ocean shore at times. Fisherman's Bay obviously had weedy and sandy areas and the oystercatchers, where noted, were more often in the weedy portions of the bay.

Quite often there was one, and occasionally two, Sooty Oystercatchers in company with the Pied variety. There were long periods when no Sooty Oystercatchers were recorded, e.g. only two were seen from August 1930 till October 1931, a period of 14 months. Then from mid-January till early August 1932 one bird was seen on nearly every visit, presumably the same bird. Then from that period till February 1935 one or two birds were seen sporadically. Right at the end of Sutton's observation period, four to six birds were recorded on the last four visits from mid-March till mid-April. On 30th March 1935 Sutton commented: "on the outward journey over the u.o.s. shore of F[isherman's] Bay I saw 3, two of which had sharp beaks (young of the year) coming back there were 5 birds, 3 of which were standing on stones on one of the ballast-stone heaps in F Bay. They seemed to be feeding off the stone." On the next week's journey he commented: "3 on F Bay, 2 on the west side of the channel. The three were young birds – sharp beaks." The spike in numbers of Sooty Oystercatchers in autumn 1935 could have been due to the presence of young birds, although Philippa Horton has pointed out that HANZAB reports different-shaped bill tips for oystercatchers, depending on their diet and feeding substrate (Marchant and Higgins 1993).

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