

# *SAOA Historical Series No 55*

## *John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes*

### *by Penny Paton — Part Four*

Parts One to Three of John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes described the tenor of Sutton's approximately weekly visits from April 1930 to April 1935 and started a systematic appraisal of the bird species recorded (Paton 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Part Three began the group that Sutton was particularly interested in — the waders — and we continue with them here. One of the rarest waders seen by Sutton was the Turnstone, which is hardly surprising given their liking for rocky shores and seaweed-strewn sandy beaches. Turnstones were recorded on only three visits, with the first sighting a sole bird on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1931. The Turnstone was near Pelican Point on the northern end of the peninsula and in company with Crested Terns and Silver Gulls near the water's edge. On Sutton's approach the Turnstone flushed and shortly after was lost to view. Turnstones were not seen again until 1934 when on 29<sup>th</sup> September on a very windy day, three were feeding on the ocean side of Pelican Point "on the slope of the shore line, where they were going through some of the debris left here by the tide ... turning over some of the debris". They flew away to the south and were not closely observed again. Two of the three had darkish breasts and were thus in breeding plumage. This sighting followed two very high tides in the preceding week leaving more water on the peninsula than Sutton had previously seen. The last sighting was a possible one of four birds on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1935 on a day of gale-force winds and some squally rain. These birds were on the weedy part of White Beach Bay (I think this is near the north-eastern point of Outer Harbor peninsula) and were mainly black on the head, throat and upper breast, with the rest of the body and underwing white.

Red-kneed Dotterels were likewise seen on few occasions, the first being 24<sup>th</sup> June 1933, when three pairs were seen on surface water in samphire between the seashore and the railwaymen's houses (which seem to be just south of Fisherman's Wharf). A week later there were five birds in the same location and by the next week there were just three birds in this swampy land. Then on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1935, a very threatening day with light rain at times and poor visibility, a single Red-kneed Dotterel was on the edge of the swamp about the furthest point from the railway officials' house, presumably in the same location as the 1933 birds.

As birdwatchers we all have 'special' birds that for some reason take our fancy and one of Sutton's special birds appears to have been the Double-banded Plover, or Dotterel as he called them. As this is the only wader species to breed in New Zealand and then winter in Australia, Sutton saw larger numbers in winter but did report lower numbers over summer at Outer Harbor. There were a few months when no birds were recorded but this may not reflect their absence from the area, rather that Sutton did not see them. These months were November and December 1930, January 1931, September to November 1932 (but from few visits in the latter two months), January 1934 and September 1934. The highest winter counts were 41 birds in 1930, 85 in 1931, 60 in 1932, 54 in 1933 and 90 in 1934. On his first sighting at Outer Harbor on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1930 he made notes and rudimentary diagrams of their plumage and behaviour as if he was not well acquainted with the species. On subsequent sightings he often noted whether the birds he saw had one or two breast bands, which is an indication of the extent of their breeding plumage. He also described exactly where he saw

them and whether they were by themselves or mixed with other bird species. Most often they were in the company of Red-capped Dotterels and/or Red-necked Stints.

Red-capped Plovers (or Dotterels as Sutton called them) were of lesser interest as often their numbers are noted with no other information. Occasionally Sutton indicated exactly where he saw them and, if he thought there was a nest, he would try to locate it. Their numbers varied considerably, from just one or two to the highest daily count of 169 on both 28<sup>th</sup> March 1931 and 26<sup>th</sup> May 1933. This species was not always in one large flock but sometimes in small numbers at different locations around the peninsula.

Pacific Golden Plovers were dealt with in Part Two (Paton 2015b), where I indicated that they were recorded by Sutton between early spring and early autumn only and in numbers up to 34 birds. The Grey Plover on the other hand was a much rarer bird, with one bird being seen just four times and, as three of these were in a five week period, it is likely that these sightings were of the same individual. The first viewing was on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1933 near the Yacht Squadron Clubhouse when a bird flushed showing a black tail and white rump. Sutton watched it feeding “catching and eating some little objects that jumped out of the water”. It was not until a second viewing on 18<sup>th</sup> March that Sutton identified this bird as a Grey Plover, when he noticed the black axillaries as it flew away. Again the bird was in the vicinity of the Clubhouse. Sutton did not indicate that the bird he saw on 25<sup>th</sup> March, this time in the weedy portion of Fisherman’s Bay, was the same Grey Plover as previously but given the rarity of sightings, this seems likely. The species was seen on only one other occasion, close to the shore line at high tide on Fisherman’s Bay in company with 19 golden plover. “Although amongst the egg [Pacific Golden Plover] it several times appeared to threaten an egg when one of those birds approached it.”

Regarding plovers and dotterels, Condon and Rix (1936) recorded one pair of Red-kneed Dotterel near Buckland Park Lake once and noted that Red-capped Dotterels were often seen on the Lake and the seashore, but did not record the Pacific Golden, the Grey Plover nor the Double-banded Dotterel.

Neither species of lapwing was common at Outer Harbor in the time that Sutton was making his observations. One to four Masked Lapwings were seen occasionally and more often in the earlier years than the later ones. In fact only one bird was seen on two occasions in 1932, none in 1933, two birds on one occasion in 1934 and two birds on two occasions in 1935. Prior to that, they were sighted occasionally but not consistently in different places on the peninsula.

Banded Lapwings were likewise uncommon, with one bird heard on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1931 and again on the 30<sup>th</sup> May near the railway station; the only record in 1933 was one bird on the shore of Fisherman’s Bay on 21<sup>st</sup> January. Then in 1934 there was a grouping of records of one or two birds from May to October. The first record was one bird “flying about, and calling, over the golf links”. Sutton mentions the golf links or golf course several times as well as a sports ground (which appears to have been quite close to the railway station) so although I can find no confirmation of these facilities at Outer Harbor at this time, they must have been there. The current North Haven golf course was not developed until about 1980. One bird was heard on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> June and two were flying towards the railway station from the swamp on 30<sup>th</sup> June and again on 11<sup>th</sup> August. Then on 25<sup>th</sup> August two were “on the land near the Snake Park, on my walk to the swamp”. I have seen no other mention of the Snake Park so am not sure what this is referring to. One bird was seen on subsequent visits through September and October and these were the last birds of this species recorded.

Condon and Rix (1936) report both lapwing species and, although they did not find any Masked Lapwing nests, they were sure that this species bred

in the vicinity of Buckland Park. They describe the Banded Lapwing as common in the paddocks in autumn and winter. All of Sutton's sightings of the Banded Lapwing were in autumn, winter and early spring.

Eastern Curlews were discussed in Part Two (Paton 2015b) and I will deal with Whimbrel here. Sutton was not familiar with the Whimbrel's call but on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1932 he saw two birds on White Beach when the curlews had flown away and these called "tetta, tella, tetta" in flight and he realised that he had heard this call on two previous occasions in the past month or so. He later found out that this was a Whimbrel call. A few months later he saw two Whimbrels on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> July. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July Sutton noted their smaller size and smaller bill compared with the curlews that they were in company with and took a full description. After this small numbers of Whimbrel were seen intermittently, with the biggest total being five birds in mid-1933. Whimbrels were seen in every month of the year except September. Condon and Rix (1936) recorded Whimbrel on only two occasions — six birds with Eastern Curlews in the mangroves in 1934 and five feeding with Banded Stilts on the swamp on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1936.

A bird recorded only once at Outer Harbor by Sutton was the Black-tailed Godwit. On 28<sup>th</sup> January 1933, as he was walking southwest of Pelican Point, an acquaintance Mr Gowling shouted to him from the water and his son picked Sutton up in a dinghy, transferred him to a launch and ferried him to the wharf near the Yacht Club. On this journey a bird was seen at the water's edge near No. 3 beacon and studied through field glasses. It was a solitary Black-tailed Godwit and Sutton clearly saw its rufous breast, white underwing and distinctive tail pattern.

Bar-tailed Godwits were also rare at Outer Harbor, with Sutton seeing one or more over two months in the spring of 1933. His first sighting on 21<sup>st</sup> October was of a single bird in company with five Curlew Sandpipers at the water's edge at Pelican Point close to the pile on the edge of the channel. "It was

feeding in the soft sand which was about 2 feet off the water, prodding its bill at varying depths into the sand, now and then to the base." As Sutton approached closer, the bird raised its wings allowing him a view of its barred rump. He was very taken with its plumage describing it as a "beautiful bird". What Sutton took to be the same bird was seen a week later flying into White Beach, where it proceeded to feed, again plunging its bill into the soft sand up to the lores. Two weeks later on 11<sup>th</sup> November he saw one bird on the sandy shore off the south western end of the weedy portion of Fisherman's Bay. This bird was joined by two others, which landed in shallow water where they fed, occasionally immersing their whole heads. Later in the day four Bar-tailed Godwits were seen near Fisherman's Bay preening on a sandy spit in the water. He took these to be different birds so recorded seven for the day. A single bird was seen on both 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November, at the edge of the channel in Fisherman's Bay on the former occasion and near White Beach on the river shore on the latter occasion.

Greenshanks were the most common mid-sized wader that Sutton recorded at Outer Harbor in his five years of observation. While they were recorded in all months of the year, it was only in the first two years of 1930 and 1931 that larger numbers were seen in the winter months; after that they were either absent or very rare in winter. The largest number seen on one day at any time of the year was 12 birds on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1930, consisting of a flock of 10 that flew across from the St Kilda side of the river and two birds that were in Mangrove Bay on the river shore. More typically up to four birds were seen and Sutton observed them in many locations, noting that they were often feeding eagerly, sometimes feeding with other birds like curlews but often by themselves or with conspecifics. Condon and Rix (1936) did not see godwits in the Buckland Park area but did record Greenshanks, usually in flocks of from six to thirty birds on the lake, the seashore or in the tidal creeks of the mangroves.

To finish this part there is a quiz for all you 'bird detectives' out there. On 9<sup>th</sup> February 1935 Sutton saw an unidentified bird:

"This bird was noticed on the uncovered shore of FBay [Fisherman's Bay] not far from the first lot of stones from Pelican Pt. It was standing about 80/90 yards away with its back towards me. It flushed and flew back towards Pelican Pt for about 300 yards. I walked back towards it but when I got about 100 yards away it flushed again & flew past Pelican Pt. I noted:

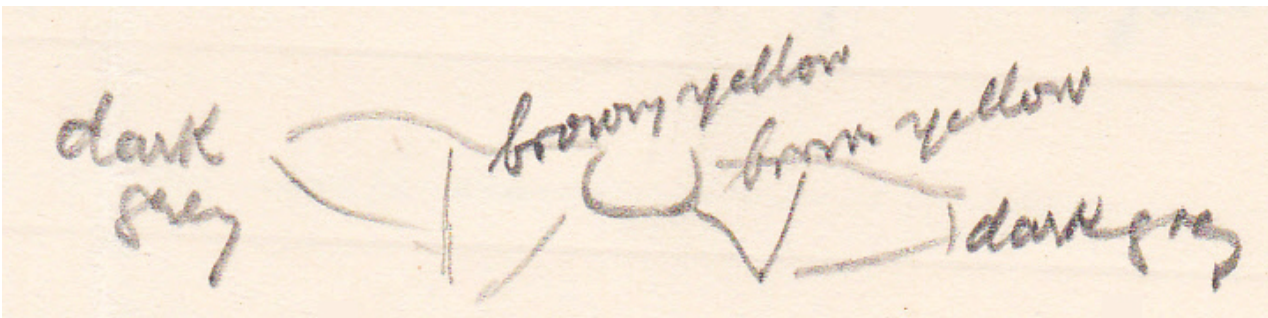
back of the head a dirty white

a largish dark patch round the eye & extending to the beak which was about an inch long and black

when it turned its head towards me, at the top of the front & head between the dark eye patches was a pure white spot.

As it squatted there was a whitish mark on the side of wing

When it flew the wings showed thus:



The body & back were black & when in flight there appeared a small white mark about tip of tail

The bird was bigger than a teal but not so big as a black duck. The beak I saw indistinctly seemed to me to be that of a petrel"

This strange 'seabird' was seen by Sutton and his 'agents' at Outer Harbor several more times after this, with the last sighting being on 22<sup>nd</sup> March. It

was observed feeding with Silver Gulls on several occasions. I have no idea what this bird could be and would welcome any suggestions.

**Correction:** In Part Two (Paton 2015b) I indicated that Sutton recorded 28 Banded Stilts on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1935 (the largest total of this species), but when I checked the notes for this date, Banded Stilts were not recorded at all. I discovered that Sutton had recorded the number of Eastern Curlews in the Banded Stilt column in the summary document and my error arose from reading off his summary document. At this stage I did not have his notes from the later years so was unable to double-check the record.

### References

Condon, H.T. and Rix, C.E. 1936. The birds of Buckland Park. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 13: 203-219.

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