

SAOA Historical Series No 56

John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes

by Penny Paton — Part Five

Part Four finished with the Greenshank and a bird quiz, based on a mystery bird that was seen by John Sutton and some of his 'agents' as he called them at Outer Harbor. David Edey came up with a plausible identification for this bird as an Arctic (now Parasitic) Jaeger, which seems to fit quite well, apart from the fact that Sutton had recorded this species once before at Outer Harbor (in March 1931; Paton 2015) and was clearly able to identify it then. Below are more or less David's words – I have just made his abbreviations into full words.

"How about Arctic Jaeger as Sutton's mystery bird? I don't think it was mentioned on Sutton's records. [As we know from my comment above he had in fact recorded it once before.] They occur occasionally near Pelican Point in summer. The plumage is variable (dark versus pale morph, immature versus adult, breeding versus non-breeding), but could include dirty white back of head, dark patch round eye to beak, 1" long black petrel-like beak, white spot on forehead, whitish mark on folded wing, dark-grey distal half on wings in flight, and immatures may have some white around the tail. Not sure about the brownish-yellow medial half of the wings (but I guess possible with a dark morph), body could be dark brown but not black? Sutton did not mention white edges to the bases of primaries in flight, nor did he mention any elongated central tail feathers, although these may be absent/worn in some birds, e.g. immatures. Why did he compare size to ducks and not gulls? If size is an issue the Pomarine Jaeger is larger than Arctic Jaeger, but less likely to be recorded inshore. Most curious to me is that he mentioned white in the wing of the squatting bird, but not of the flying bird (diagnosis of a skua/jaeger)."

I will move on now to the rest of the waterbirds, namely herons, egrets and ducks, and finish with

the raptors. White-faced Herons were seen on most of the approximately weekly trips that Sutton made to Outer Harbor between April 1930 and April 1935. Numbers of birds varied considerably from one or two to 91 seen on 28th April 1934. This large total included 42 herons in "the samphire at the back of White Beach" and 22 "on the river shore near fish creek when the north bank was covered by the tide". Another large total was 62 on 5th March 1932, when the birds were "scattered all over the razor fish section and a few on the cockle shelly part on the St Kilda side. A number of them seemed to be young birds".

On 20th January 1934 on arrival Sutton went straight to Mr Ali's hut where he met Mr Gowling and his son. The father and son had taken Sutton out to the wharf near the Yacht Club in 1933 where he saw the Black-tailed Godwit, as detailed in Part Four (Paton 2016). Sutton went with Mr Ali, Mr Gowling and his son out to the North Bank, where his acquaintances were collecting cockles. It seems clear from Sutton's comments that these men were fishermen and they stayed on the North Bank for about two and a half hours, after which Mr Ali rowed Sutton back to the Harbor Trust wharf while the other two fished in the channel. Sutton divided his sightings for this day into two columns - general sightings and those made on the North Bank. Of the 46 White-faced Herons seen on this day, 45 were on the North Bank. Sutton commented sometimes in his notes that he could not always identify birds on the North Bank due to its distance from the shore and the mirage that was sometimes present.

Generally Sutton just recorded the number of White-faced Herons in his notes, with no further detail, but on 30th April 1932 he did note that, of

the 21 birds seen that day, some had come from the mangrove end of North Bank. And again on 9th July 1932, he says: “27 – in F Bay, the samphire & 9 near Pelican Pt and a little later 18 were on the shoreline of the North Bank”. On 26th August 1933, he commented that of the 31 herons seen, 22 were east of the first creek mouth on the River.

Egrets were very rarely recorded by Sutton and only one species was identified, namely the Great Egret or White Egret as it was known to him. He saw one bird on 28th February 1931 “on the furthest point visible upwards beyond the west of the Creek”. Unfortunately as Sutton did not draw a map to go with his observations, the location of the creek is unclear, but it may be the same as White Creek of later years (which was on the river side of the Peninsula). Another Great Egret was seen on 19th August 1933, with Sutton commenting that two of the fishermen had seen a ‘white crane’ during the week, and that he saw it in the shallows at the edge of the channel in Fisherman’s Bay near some Eastern Curlews. These were the only two egrets recorded in five years of observation, making this species very rare along this part of the Adelaide shoreline. Condon and Rix (1935) did not list any egrets in their paper on the birds of the Buckland Park area, although they described the White-faced Heron as very common and breeding in the mangroves and tall trees near Buckland Park Lake.

Only two species of ducks were identified by Sutton although he did record ducks on a few occasions when he could not get a good enough look at them to be sure of their identity. Grey Teal were the more common species, but even these were seen infrequently. The highest total was 23 Grey Teal on both 23rd August 1930 and 5th December 1931. Otherwise between one and fourteen birds were seen in nearly every month of the year, but most irregularly.

The only other duck recorded to species was one Musk Duck, seen on 25th February 1933 in the sea near the Yacht Squadron Clubhouse. A fisherman had told Sutton that a female had been in this area

and it aroused great interest amongst the onlookers. Stones were thrown at the duck to see if it would dive and a boatman went out with his dog, finally getting close enough to send the dog into the water near the bird. At this the duck rushed along the top of the water and, as three Silver Gulls flew towards it, it did dive momentarily. At this point Sutton left the area.

When Sutton noticed birds being shot at, he recorded details of the shooters and what birds they were aiming at. At this time (early 1930s) the relevant act of parliament was the *Animals and Birds Protection Act 1919* (amended by *Animals and Birds Protection Act Amendment Act 1928*). The 1919 Act specified wholly protected birds, partly protected birds and unprotected birds in the schedules to the Act. All native birds were wholly protected apart from a few species on the other two schedules. Partly protected birds included ducks, protected from 1st July to 31st January, and quails, protected from 1st August to 31st January; outside these times there was an open season with bag limits. The unprotected birds included all introduced species and the following native species: all cormorants, ‘crows’, Wedge-tailed Eagles, goshawk, rosellas, Silvereyes and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos.

The first mention of shooting at Outer Harbor that I could find was on 18th July 1931 when Sutton heard three shots fired as he was observing Eastern Curlews at 2.30pm. The birds rose in flight over Fisherman’s Bay and alighted again on the shoreline. A little while later a motor boat with a dinghy appeared from Fisherman’s Bay with two young men on board, who fired at some cormorants on the beacon, killing one bird and leaving two struggling in the water. One man got into the dinghy, retrieving the dead one, while the other man killed the other two birds with one shot. After picking up the other two birds, one called out: “We have enough bait now” and they then proceeded up the river and anchored north of the big white beacon out from First Creek. Later in the day, at 4.40pm, as Sutton was leaving the claypan, he

heard a shot and saw three shooters walking through the samphire between White Beach and the claypan. Sutton thought they must have reached the area by boat as First Creek was too deep to have waded across at this time. As the curlews circled, one man shot at them but did not hit any birds, as they were too high.

On Sutton's visit on 20th February 1932 a fisherman told him that there had been a lot of shooting at night during the previous week, mainly about Torrens Island. His informant also said that two motor cars with shooters had gone to Pelican Point on Monday night and on Friday night there had been shooting in the claypans in the samphire. Sutton commented that the duck shooting season had opened on Sunday at midnight. As well as shooters disturbing the birds, Sutton had to contend with campers, as he found at Easter time in 1932. On his visit on 26th March, there were at least ten

tents pitched and four parties of 'cocklers' which he thought explained the dearth of waders on this day. On 26th November 1932 a fisherman told Sutton that there had been people in a large motor boat shooting at curlews during the week. In March of 1933 fishermen reported to Sutton about shooting during the week, which Sutton put down to duck shooting during the open season.

Just after Christmas in 1932, on Sutton's visit on 31st December, there were several tents at the south side of the Yacht Clubhouse and a double tent just

past Pelican Point, and he was told that there had been shooting on the previous Friday night. Camping at this time of the year became a regular thing and on 30th December 1933, there were four families camped in tents on the east side of the Yacht Clubhouse and the people were out in Fisherman's Bay and Sutton rather grumpily commented: "there were many footprints about the place. They no doubt have disturbed the birds,

especially the E. Curlews very much". A year later on 29th December 1934 there were two tents pitched on the eastern side of Pelican Point, by White Bay Beach, but Sutton made no comment on the occupants of the tents or disturbance to birds on this occasion.

Six species of diurnal raptors were observed at Outer Harbor by John Sutton, but only one was seen fairly regularly. The Nankeen Kestrel was observed generally

singly and mainly about Osborne and the more developed southern parts of Outer Harbor. Other birds of prey included the Whistling Kite, seen five times in five years; the first occasion was on 28th April 1934 when a pair was seen over "First Creek" at White Beach, flying close together and eventually rising very high. Then on 2nd June of the same year, a single bird was circling high up over the north end of Torrens Island. On the last day of June there were two pairs circling over the shore on the mangrove end of North Bank about the 'cut'. When



Nankeen Kestrel, photographed by Peter McKenzie at Pine Point on 23/11/15

they came in low the Silver Gulls and White-faced Herons were scared away. Twice one bird flew to the ground and seemed to pick something up which it then carried in flight. Then on 25th August 1934 a kite was circling low over the Port River and northern part of Torrens Island, harassed by two ravens. One of the ravens seemed to strike the kite and later it seemed to Sutton that the kite had struck or at least got very close to one of the ravens. Eventually the ravens desisted and the kite flew away east over Le Fevre Peninsula. The last sighting on 2nd March 1935 was briefer and was of a Whistling Kite chased by ravens and flying westwards along the "Yacht Club Cut".

A Swamp Harrier was seen on only one occasion on 20th May 1933, when it was flying along the shoreline and later over the samphire, at times pursued by ravens. Another raptor that was seen only once in the five year observation period was the White-bellied Sea Eagle. On 16th May 1931 when Sutton was up the creek [presumably First Creek] he heard gulls, ravens and curlews calling and then saw a bird sitting on a beacon on the east side of the creek. As ravens continued to harass the bird, it flew away across the river and the upswept wings could be clearly seen. The bird was immature, with a brownish general colour.

Australian Hobbies were seen only twice, the first being on 7th May 1932, when the hawk struck a Singing Honeyeater in the samphire from a height of 15 feet. The honeyeater took refuge in the samphire and the falcon flew down again from a height of 20 feet. As it was unsuccessful, the hobby flew away to the west just above the samphire. On the second occasion on 15th July 1933 an Australian Hobby was seen near the cricket ground flying about 15 feet above the ground; it went past the sea wall and then turned north and was lost to view. Likewise a single Brown Falcon was seen just twice, the first time on Boxing Day of 1931. Sutton observed the falcon fly from the mainland to the river shore of the peninsula and then upstream, being lost from view near First Creek. On 23rd October 1934 a Brown Falcon was flying over the

samphire near Pelican Point "at a good height and attacked by two Ravens" one of which soon gave up the chase. The second raven persisted but missed the hawk every time.

There was only one sighting of an owl and that was of a Barn Owl on 25th March 1933 that flew from the south end of the wharf over the backyards and cottages and then circled back around towards the Yacht Clubhouse. Sutton was not sure if the owl had come from the trees or from a big shed.

I should like to express my thanks to Philippa Horton for editing this article in her usual efficient and detailed fashion and to David Edey for his suggestion re the 'mystery bird'.

References

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