

# *SAOA Historical Series No 57*

## *John Sutton's Outer Harbor Notes*

### *by Penny Paton — Part Six*

Part Five continued documenting the bird species seen at Outer Harbor by John Sutton on his nearly weekly trips between April 1930 and April 1935, finishing with the birds of prey that he recorded there. I now pick up the thread starting with pigeons and parrots. Pigeons and doves were apparently rare in this region in the 1930s as Condon and Rix (1936) did not record any in their three-year survey of the birds of Buckland Park from late 1932 to 1935, although they did note that another observer had seen Peaceful Doves there. Sutton reported that on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1933 a railway porter told him that there were two doves near his house, and Sutton thought that these were probably Peaceful Doves as he had seen one near Osborne the previous week. Osborne is now a suburb on the northern part of the Le Fevre Peninsula, about two kilometres southeast of the Outer Harbor Railway Station.

Sutton saw Purple-crowned Lorikeets flying over in ones or twos on only three occasions — on 26/4/30, 11/2/33 and 25/8/34. Condon and Rix (1936) commented that this species was in flocks in the river red gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* and around the Buckland Park homestead. This was the only species of lorikeet seen by either group of observers.

Galahs were more infrequent still, with sightings on only two occasions, 3 or 4 birds on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1931 and one bird on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1933. When Sutton

saw the first Galah by itself on 1/8/31 near the Outer Harbor Railway Station and associated houses, he took it to be an escapee, as Galahs were at this time rare near Adelaide. The southward expansion of Galahs in South Australia began in the 1920s, with the first sightings at Mt Mary in 1918, Naracoorte in 1925 and on Kangaroo Island in about 1930 (Higgins 1999). So in the early 1930s Galahs would have been a relative rarity in the Adelaide region. As Sutton saw another three birds flying near the Yacht Squadron clubhouse a few minutes later, he was more inclined to think that they were wild birds. The second sighting on 6/5/33 was of one bird, fluffed up, sitting on a buoy and, when chased by people in a boat, it flew to a yacht and finally to a beacon at White Beach.

Condon and Rix (1936) recorded Galahs as breeding at Buckland Park and made a curious comment that both Little Corellas and Galahs had been introduced and had greatly increased in numbers. Condon (1968) concurs with this in relation to the Little Corella; he says "The population at Buckland Park (Port Gawler) is said to be descended from birds introduced from the North, more than fifty years ago" [i.e. prior to 1918]. However he does not make the same assertion about Galahs so I expect that Condon and Rix (1936) made an error in this regard. It is more likely that they were deceived by the increase in numbers of Galahs and put it down to introduction



*No longer a rarity!*

rather than increase through breeding and/or immigration to southern parts.

Sutton saw Rock Parrots many times on his excursions to Outer Harbor, with numbers varying from a few birds to 30 on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1933. There are longish gaps in some years when no birds were sighted, but there are inconsistencies between years. Birds were seen from April to July 1930 (but Sutton only began recording in April of that year), from January to August in 1931, from December 1931 to July 1933 (with just a few gaps), from late December 1933 to early May 1934 and then from early December 1934 to April 1935 (when Sutton ceased regular visits). Generally birds were absent or in small numbers in the spring and early summer, suggesting that most had left the area, probably to breed on offshore islands. The pattern of records correlates well with those reported from the Le Fevre Peninsula by the Winslets, who recorded them in all months from 1972-85, but mainly from December through to April (Higgins 1999). Most often the Rock Parrots were in the samphire habitat, sometimes sitting atop nitre bushes *Nitraria billardierei*, but they were also seen in the mangroves along the Port River shoreline and in bushes near the Yacht Squadron clubhouse. Totals for individual days were often made up of several smaller flocks of birds. On 21<sup>st</sup> February 1931 Sutton found two dead Rock Parrots lying in thick greenish debris near the high-water mark. He theorised that they might have been tangled in the debris and drowned in the very high tides of the previous week. Condon and Rix (1936) mentioned that Rock Parrots were common at times in the mangroves near Buckland Park.

The only other parrot species seen by Sutton was the Budgerigar; the first sighting was of two birds on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1933 on a tree near the seashore. He was told that a railway officer had recently captured six birds but they had all died. Two weeks later Sutton heard two birds near the huts at Fisherman's Bay. This is consistent with most of the sightings of this species in the Adelaide region, which occur in the late spring and summer months. Condon and Rix (1936) did not report Budgerigars in their survey but other observers saw the species.

Like Condon and Rix (1936) who frequently saw the Sacred Kingfisher in the mangroves, in teatree *Melaleuca halmaturorum* and near the Gawler River, Sutton recorded small numbers of this species on many visits, but more often in the April

to September period. In April 1931 he saw a group of four birds, two smaller and two larger, feeding apparently on crabs and surmised that it might have been a family group of two adults and two young. Sutton recorded only one species of cuckoo at Outer Harbor – the Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo – although Condon and Rix (1936) also reported Pallid, Fan-tailed and Black-eared Cuckoos from Buckland Park. Most of Sutton's records came from July through to August (1930), June/July to September (1931, 1932 and 1933) and July to November (1934). On 30<sup>th</sup> August 1930 he saw a cuckoo acting suspiciously near a Slender-billed Thornbill in the samphire but was unable to locate a nest. Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoos are known to parasitise Slender-billed Thornbills (Higgins 1999).

Surprisingly, Sutton only recorded Grey Fantails on four of the 249 trips he made to Outer Harbor. Two birds were seen twice in late April and twice in May 1933 in the second right-angled turn in First Creek in the mangroves. They responded to Sutton's 'kissing' noises by flying out to investigate him. In contrast Grey Fantails were common in the teatree scrub to the west of the Buckland Park homestead (Condon and Rix 1936). The timing of Sutton's records is interesting as it coincides with the autumn-winter period when Grey Fantails currently occur in small numbers on the Adelaide Plains, particularly in coastal regions. What is surprising to me is that he did not record them during autumn-winter in any other year.

Willie Wagtails on the other hand were seen on most occasions, with 17 being the highest total for any one day, but five or six birds being the average. Sutton heard a juvenile begging call at First Creek on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1932 but could not locate the bird and on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1933 he found a pair with one juvenile at First Creek, thus confirming breeding at the site. Condon and Rix (1936) also found Willie Wagtails breeding at Buckland Park, with a nest in the teatree scrub on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1935, but they made no comment on abundance.

Numbers of Welcome Swallows fluctuated considerably, from just a few to over 100 birds on several occasions. Sometimes they were settled but often they were flying over or feeding low over the water and once they were resting out of the wind on a shelly beach. There were juveniles being fed by adults in December 1932 and near the sheds and Yacht Squadron in October and November of 1933. Sutton had trouble identifying martins so usually he recorded them as martin species, rather than

attributing them to either Fairy or Tree Martins. He was sure of one Tree Martin at White Beach with a flock of Welcome Swallows on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1933, but his other records from 1933 and 1934 were assigned to 'martins'. He was fairly sure that the 26 he saw near the Railway Station on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1933 were Fairy Martins. Condon and Rix (1936) saw both species but made no further comment.

One to three Grey Shrike-thrushes were recorded by Sutton from various locations — the samphire, the mangroves at Mangrove Bay and First Creek, at Pelican Point and at the huts (I am unclear about the huts' exact location). Several times Sutton describes them as small birds and he thought that one of them might have been immature. All 13 records were from the period April to August (i.e. the autumn-winter) although this species is generally regarded as sedentary or resident. Condon and Rix (1936) described them as common in the teatree scrub, particularly in August 1935, so it is possible that there was some movement of this species into coastal locations over winter.

Sutton recorded Magpie-larks infrequently, with sightings of one to five birds being clumped into three distinct time periods, indicating that it was the same birds that he was seeing from week to week. The first period was August through to early October 1931, when two birds were usually seen in the more developed parts of the peninsula, around the wharf, cottages and the recreation ground. The next period was August and September 1932 when one bird was seen near the Yacht Squadron and another period from May to July 1934 when two birds were in various places from the wharf and swampy depression near the houses to the samphire. Condon and Rix (1936) did record Magpie-larks but made no further comment.

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes appear to have been rare in the region at that time, as Sutton saw only one bird on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1932 near the first hut from the Yacht Squadron clubhouse, presumably just to the north of this building. Likewise Condon and Rix (1936) only had one record of this species from June 1936. Sutton also saw a single White-winged Triller once only — on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1931. The bird in female or immature plumage was perched on a nitre bush near the Fisherman's Bay shoreline. Condon and Rix (1936) saw a solitary bird on 10<sup>th</sup> November and a pair on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1935 at Buckland Park. An occasional triller still turns up on

the Adelaide Plains in the spring, no doubt a bird moving through on its southward migration.

White-fronted Chats were present on nearly every visit that Sutton made to Outer Harbor with 48 birds being the maximum seen on any one day. A nest was found in the samphire by the 'Old Tank' in September 1930; it contained three bare young on 20<sup>th</sup> September and then two feathered young on 24<sup>th</sup> September. In early November of the same year a pair with two juveniles was seen. In 1933 a man who had been cutting down artichokes [probably artichoke thistles — a weed] near the Ferguson works on 20<sup>th</sup> July, found two nests each with three eggs, which Sutton thought probably belonged to White-fronted Chats. The Mephan Ferguson pipe works was at Outer Harbor as early as 1915 and was still there in 1941 (Trove).

I mentioned Sutton's 'dark thornbills' in Part One (Paton 2015a). We now call this species the Slender-billed Thornbill, with the Gulf St Vincent population being a subspecies *Acanthiza iredalei rosinae* (Matthew 2002). The subspecies currently occurs patchily around the northern shore of the Gulf as far south as Torrens Island, but is assumed to be extinct near Port Adelaide (Department for Environment and Heritage 2008). Thus Sutton's sightings of this nationally listed Vulnerable subspecies are of a population that no longer occurs at Outer Harbor, due to development and destruction of its samphire habitat. Matthew (2002) deduced that the species is largely sedentary, that birds form foraging flocks for most of the year, only breaking up into pairs for breeding, and that the population density is high compared with other thornbills. Sutton's records varied between one individual and a maximum of 42 birds made up of smaller flocks on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1930. There are large gaps of months when Sutton did not record this species, coinciding with the latter half of the breeding period; these gaps were between February and April 1931, November 1931 and April 1932, December 1932 and early May 1933, November 1933 and mid-April 1934, and October 1934 to end of April 1935. Given Matthew's (2002) notion that the birds are sedentary and that there was a considerable amount of samphire at Outer Harbor in the 1930s, it does seem curious that the birds appeared to be absent for many months. The only explanation I can offer is that they may have acted differently when they had young and were harder to see. Condon and Rix (1936) merely recorded that the species

bred in the samphire near the mangroves at Buckland Park.

Sutton recorded only one species of robin at Outer Harbor, a single Flame Robin, "a male...seen in the samphire near the old tank" on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1933. Winter is the time of year that Flame Robins migrate to the west from their breeding areas in eastern Australia and in the 1930s numbers of Flame Robins were recorded in the South East of South Australia and in the Mt Lofty Ranges region. Numbers have decreased considerably over the past 40 years and probably longer, and now there are few sightings on the Adelaide Plains or in the ranges. Condon and Rix (1936) also recorded Flame Robins. They sighted four pairs on a fallowed plot, one mile north of Virginia on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1935 and one bird near the Buckland Park homestead on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1935. They did record other robin species, namely the occasional Scarlet Robin and sightings every now and then of good numbers of Red-capped Robins in the teatree scrub, with 14 birds on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1935.

One to five White-browed Scrubwrens were seen infrequently and mainly in the mangroves along the creeks feeding into the Port River, but also in nitre bush and in samphire. Condon and Rix (1936) reported that the birds bred at Buckland Park and that they were common in the mangroves there. Sutton saw Superb Fairywrens very infrequently; in fact he only recorded one to three birds on 12 occasions, only in the May to October period and most frequently from May to August, i.e. in the non-breeding period. The only comment from Condon and Rix (1936) was that the species was a permanent breeding resident in the mangroves at Buckland Park.

Brown Songlarks are regular migrants to the south of South Australia from late winter through summer and a few birds still come into the greater Adelaide region at these times, but numbers on the Plains are decreasing as suitable grassland habitat is decreasing. Sutton recorded up to five Brown Songlarks from mid-June through to January and more often in 1931, 1932 and 1934. They were not recorded at all in 1930 and just a few times in the early spring of 1933. Sutton clearly continued to visit the Outer Harbor after the notes finish in mid-April 1935 as he published a few sightings in the *South Australian Ornithologist* after this date. For example he reported Brown Songlark for 28<sup>th</sup> November 1937 (Sutton 1938). There was no comment from Condon and Rix (1936) except that

Brown Songlarks were recorded breeding at Buckland Park.

One or two Little Grassbirds were reported by Sutton but only during the period from July to October. In fact the seven records from July to September 1932 probably refer to the same two birds, which responded to Sutton's mimicking of their call from the samphire near the 'old tank'. Records in other years came from this same location but also from the swamp near the officials' residences on the western side of the peninsula. As the birds were heard rather than seen on most occasions I wonder if they were present at other times but not calling or responding to calls at these times. Condon and Rix (1936) said that grassbirds were numerous, particularly in the lignum and that "in places almost every clump of lignum contained a nest of this species in the breeding season". On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1935, 19 nests were found in the lignum, containing 42 eggs and 10 chicks.

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