

# SAOA Historical Series No 69

## Frank Elliot Parsons (1882 to 1968)

### Part 2, by Penny Paton

#### Pterylography

Pterylography is the study of the feather tracts of birds. From the early 1940s, Frank turned his ornithological attention to publishing his book on pterylography. Examples of his detailed sketches have been included throughout this article, as well as in the first part of his life story, which was published with the Winter issue of 'The Birder'.

Ragless (1969) relates a story about how Frank Parsons was probably the first ornithologist to see the Mallee Whipbird (generally regarded as a subspecies of the Western Whipbird but recently proposed as a separate species), but he did not publish or claim the record as it was only a sight record. He was obviously of the old school of collectors who liked to have a bird skin to prove the identity of a species, particularly given that they did not have the use of field guides and digital cameras with zoom lenses. In either 1914 or 1915, when Parsons was surveying near Loxton in the Hundred of Pyap, he "was resting while the men were cutting a line in the Mallee when the bird came close to him and erected its crest. Years later when he saw the bird to the north of Pinnaroo, he remembered his earlier experience. He is quite positive of this sight record" (Ragless 1969). The species was not 'discovered' until 1920, when the birds were heard and their nests and eggs found in Victoria, and the first specimen was not taken until 1932 (Howe and Ross 1933).

Ill-health in the early 1940s forced Frank to abandon collecting birds and active field work and he turned his ornithological attention to publishing on pterylography — the study of the feather tracts of birds. While it was known from pre-Linnean times that feathers on

birds were distributed in specific patterns over their bodies, it was not until the early nineteenth century that pterylography became a branch of avian anatomy (Clench 1970). From his experience in collecting and skinning birds, Frank would have handled many birds of various species and in the early 1920s he began to study the feather tracts and wing shapes and sizes of a number of Australian bird species.

The introduction to his book on pterylography indicates that he collected this information over 16 years prior to his sickness and the Foreword by Sir John Cleland states that this branch of avian anatomy is useful for taxonomy (Parsons 1968).

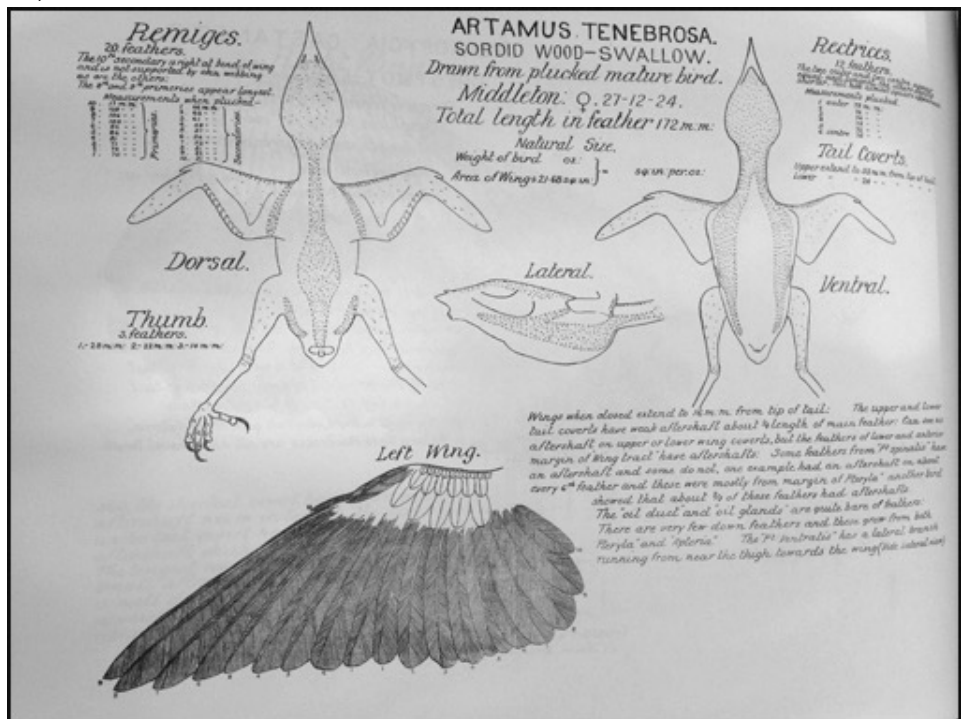


Illustration 6 — Wing and feather tracts of Dusky Woodswallow from Parsons (1968) Pterylography

The original drawings that form the basis of this book are held by the CSIRO in Canberra (Ragless 1969). An introductory page, shown as Illustration 1 in part 1 of Parsons' history, describes the structure of a feather, illustrated in great detail and annotated to show the quill, shaft, after-shaft, barbs, barbules and barbicels. In all, 27 species or groups of birds are covered, ranging from non-passerines like a prion, goshawk and stint to passerines such as Willie Wagtail, New Holland Honeyeater and Australian Magpie. For each species is given the location for the bird pictured, the number of remiges (wing feathers) and rectrices (tail feathers), a description of the bird's feathers, and the shape and size of the wing, all illustrated by a drawing of one wing, and the feather tracts on the ventral and dorsal surfaces of the bird (Illustrations 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9). At the back of the book are notes on flight and a summary document of information on all the birds' bodies that contributed to the study (Illustration 7). Parsons' interest in flight was shown also by his addressing the SAOA on this subject and this address was later published (Parsons 1930). The publication on pterylography is noteworthy for its attention to detail, the fine line drawings and the neatness of the printed annotations, all testaments to Parsons' skill as a draftsman, no doubt honed in his profession as a surveyor. Early in his time as an SAOA member, in May 1920, Frank wrote to the

Secretary shortly after his election as Vice President, tendering his resignation from the position. In his words:

"I must thank the members for having elected me, but it appears to be giving offence to one of our number, who has not been backward in expressing it. I trust that my resignation will again bring contentment and harmony, which has been the greatest factor in making our monthly gatherings so thoroughly enjoyable and useful."

The record is silent on whom the unnamed member was and the Committee accepted his resignation with regret (SAOA Correspondence, SLSA). However, this letter illustrates the nature of the man: generous in offering to resign rather than cause disharmony, and apparently not harbouring ill-feelings towards the organisation. Indeed later in the same month, he wrote to the SAOA Secretary, indicating that he had examined the skin collection of the late Dr Angove (the subject of Historical Series 46-48, Paton 2013, 2014a, 2014b) but found that weevils had destroyed the skins. He suggested that the SAOA should attempt to secure Angove's egg collection and the field notes, so that the same fate should not befall them.

Species	Locality	Date	Sex	Total Length	Spread of Wings in Inches	Weight in Ounces	Square Inches Area of Wings	30 inches per sq. of Bird	Remarks
<i>Petroica phoenicea</i> Flame Robin	GOOLWA	8-6-30	♂	5 1/4	9	.5	14.99	30.00	skin in collection
<i>Petroica ewingii</i> Hooded Robin	Sturt SA	18-6-25	♂	6 3/4	5 7/8	7/8	19.20	21.94	
<i>Seisura inexpectata</i> Restless Flycatcher	Mt Lofly	18-3-26	♂	7 1/2	11 1/2	.74	30.44	41.13	skin in collection
<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i> Willie Wagtail	Glen Osmond	15-6-30	♂	8 1/2	11 3/4	1 1/24	25.76	32.53	
<i>Rhipidura preussi</i> Grey Fantail	Mt Lofly	17-3-26	♀	6	7 5/8	.26	12.78	49.15	
" "	"	29-11-25	♂	5 5/8	7 7/8	1/4	13.80	55.20	
<i>Neositta pileolata</i> Black capped Sittella	Crafers	11-6-27	♂	4 3/4	10 3/4	.47	17.05	36.28	
<i>Climacteris leucophaea</i> White throated Tree Creeper	Mt Lofly	5-4-26	♀	6 5/8	10 1/4	.83	16.81	20.24	
<i>Dicaeum hirundinaceum</i> Mistletoe Bird	Paradise	27-8-29	♂	3 1/2	6 3/4	.31	8.38	27.03	
<i>Zosterops lateralis</i> silveryeye	Glen Osmond	18-6-25	♂	4 1/2	6 1/2	1/82	8.44	24.55	
" "	Mt Compass	24-6-29	♀	4 1/4	7	3/8	9.40	25.70	skin in collection
<i>Meliphaga inescens</i> Singing Honeyeater	Kimba	26-4-26	♂	8 3/8	11 1/2	1.	22.78	22.78	
<i>Meliphaga novaehollandiae</i> Yellow-faced Honey-eater	Mt Compass	24-6-29	♀	5 1/4	7 3/8	.44	10.82	24.6	
<i>Meliphaga plumula</i> Yellow-browed Honeyeater	Kimba	26-4-26		6 1/4	8 3/4	.66	15.50	23.48.	
<i>Meliphaga persimilis</i> White-plumed H. Eater	Blackwood	27-3-26	♀	6 1/2	9 1/8	.625	13.70	21.92	
<i>Meliphaga lewinii</i> White-eared H. Eater	Kimba	26-4-26		7 1/4	9 3/8	.81	22.36	27.60	

Illustration 7 — Example page of notes on birds that form the basis of Parsons (1968) Pterylography

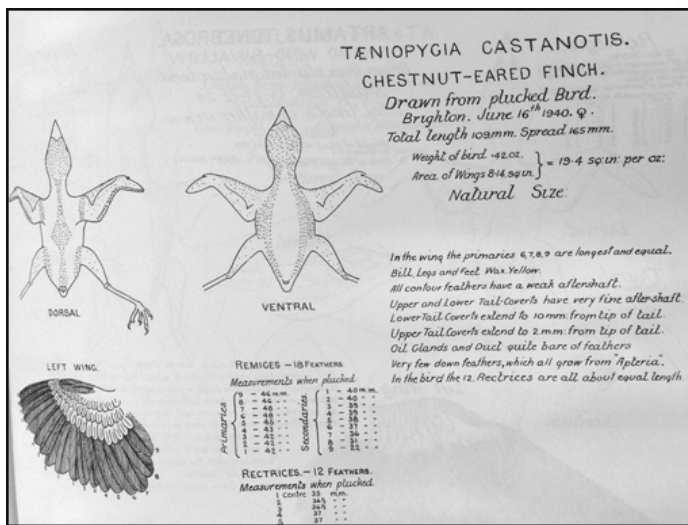
**Frank Elliot Parsons – later life**

In about 1936 Parsons became interested in butterflies (Ragless 1969), an interest he shared with another SAOA member and friend, Frank Angel. Together with Frank Angel and Frank's twin brother Sidney, he traversed Australia collecting specimens (Ragless 1970) and became an authority on the subject of the Lepidoptera. Trips were made to Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory and it was in Central Australia that he found a new form, which Frank Angel described and named *Ogyris hewitsonsi parsonsi* (Ragless 1969). Modern taxonomy does not recognise this subspecies or indeed even this species, but suffice it to say it is probably one of the *Ogyris* sp. of butterflies in the family Lycaenidae – the blues and coppers.

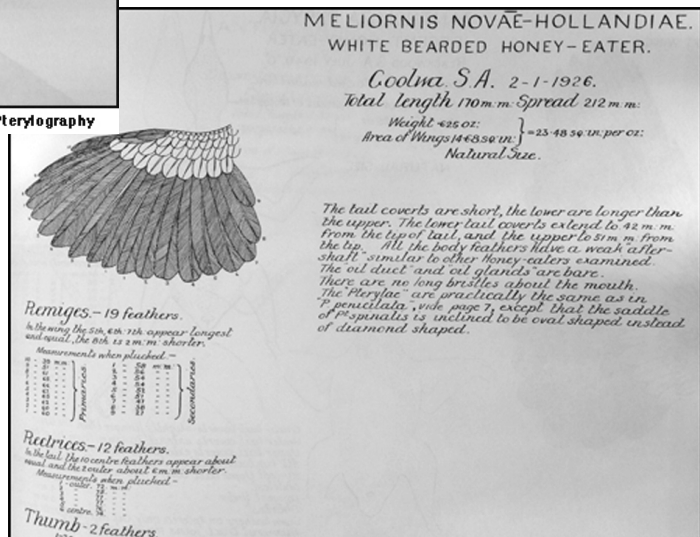
A good tennis player in his early years, later in life Parsons excelled at bowls and billiards (Ragless 1969). He suffered from osteoarthritis for many years and used two sticks for walking (one can be seen on the ground in the photo of him as an older man on his knees, Photo 1). Frank's wife, Ethel, died in 1956 and, while engaged in fieldwork near Marino in pursuit of butterflies, Frank's heart was overtaxed and he died on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1968 (Reid 2000).



**Photo 1 — Frank Parsons in later life**  
(from South Australian Ornithologist Vol 25 (4): 86)



**Illustration 8 — Wing and feather tracts of Zebra Finch from Parsons (1968) Pterylography**



**Illustration 9 — Wing of New Holland Honeyeater from Parsons (1968) Pterylography**

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