

Historical Series No 76.

Mathew Symonds Clark (1839 -1920)

Part 2 by Penny Paton

Synopsis of Parrot Records from Diaries and Publications

As there is information on the parrot family in both the Royal Society publication (Clark 1889) as well as in the diaries, I have synthesised Clark's records from these two sources in the following discussion. Figure 5 is a photo of Second Creek near Rochester Street, Leabrook, at the turn of the twentieth century, giving a general idea of the creek habitat of Burnside.

The **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo** (Figure 6) was once common and numerous on the Adelaide Plains but this changed with its destruction in large numbers because of its depredations in the new cornfields (Clark 1889). Between his arrival in the colony in 1850 and 1889, Clark had seen small numbers on rare occasions on the Plains, but in 1852 on a trip to Nairne, Strathalbyn and Macclesfield, he had seen several large flocks, some of which attained 100 birds. He thought in 1889 that a few birds might still be found in the Hills within 10 miles of Adelaide. The diaries record two birds at Hazelwood in August 1867 and one in the



Figure 5 – Second Creek crossing Knightbridge near Rochester Street, Leabrook (from the Critic, December 1903, reproduced in Warburton 1961)

Fifth Creek Gully in 1864, and a much later record of 10 birds flying over Hazelwood in September 1880 seen by RSC (most likely a Clark or a Crompton family member).

While **Major Mitchell's Cockatoo** was not found very close to Adelaide and Clark (1889) had never seen a wild bird, he reported that Gould had said that this species bred at Gawler and that in the late 1880s it was still to be found within 50 to 60 miles of Adelaide in the direction of the Murray. A diary entry for 5th February 1890 noted that Robert Frederick Ware had recorded this cockatoo nesting at Erith within the last three years and that formerly these birds were plentiful "at Pearling Belt and Port gawler (sic)", including a record of about 1000 birds at Port Gawler on one occasion. Ware (1829-1909) arrived in the colony in 1838 and eventually settled at Erith where he was a farmer, hawker and postmaster. Erith is on the northern Adelaide Plains, northwest of Owen, and I believe that Clark's Pearling Belt should be Peachey/Peachy Belt, an area of woodland southwest of Gawler. Only a fraction of this diverse and important woodland is extant today.

Galahs, arguably the most common cockatoo in Australia now, were once confined to the arid and semi-arid parts of Australia, but the clearance of native vegetation and the provision of water for stock throughout much of the dry inland enabled the species to invade the newly created wheat belts (Rowley 1990). This was somewhat akin to the expansion of the Crested Pigeon, where the



Figure 6 – Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
(Image by Brian Young and used courtesy of the photographer and the Birds SA website photographic gallery)

extension of their range into better-watered and more temperate areas of South Australia began as early as the 1890s (Black 2015). Symonds Clark first recorded Galahs in 1897, having seen “a few about” in January of that year (SLSA PRG 389/7). However, he was not sure if they were wild birds or escapees, as he had been told by a Mrs. Reeve that a dealer had lost 40 Galahs and large numbers had been brought to Adelaide, presumably from the north. Clark saw three birds at Knightsbridge in January 1897 and others told him that they had seen them recently too: Mr. Gee at Kensington Park, Mr. Ashby at Edwards Town (sic) and Mr. Mellor at the Reedbeds. Captain White noted that: “Small parties have visited the district from time to time, but not to stay” (White 1919). It is probable that some or all of the birds seen were wild birds, but it does beg the question of whether some of the escaped cage birds did enter the wild population. Clark’s diaries are silent on the Galah on the Adelaide Plains after this one entry.

In the first few decades of Clark’s life in the colony, the most common cockatoo about Hazelwood and the Mount Lofty Ranges was the **Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo** (Figure 7). Clark saw small flocks in the MLR on “many occasions” and occasionally near his home at Hazelwood from 1853/54 till 1880, sometimes flying over and occasionally settled in trees. On one occasion he believed that three birds had overwintered in eucalypts at Hazelwood in March 1876. He recorded them in the MLR more frequently and in larger numbers, including near Willunga, at



Figure 7 — Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos

(Image used courtesy of the photographer and the Birds SA website photographic gallery)

Bridgewater and at Kangarilla.

Symonds Clark appeared particularly fond of **Cockatiels** which he kept in his aviaries over many years and which bred freely there. Early on they were uncommonly for sale but sometime prior to

1889 they were brought to Adelaide in large numbers. He first saw them in the wild on the Le Fevre Peninsula in 1855 and later saw them at Norwood several times and more rarely around Burnside. All of Clark’s records were from the spring months of September to November, corresponding with the species’ movement to southern parts of



Figure 8 — Cockatiel

(Image by Trevor Cox and used courtesy of the photographer and the Birds SA website photographic gallery)

South Australia in spring and summer. In 1868 and 1870 he saw flocks of 8-13 birds flying over Norwood or Adelaide city and his first record from Hazelwood came on 13th October 1870, when three birds alighted in eucalypts there. This occurred twice more, in 1873 and 1874 and, on the latter occasion, the ten wild birds may have been induced to land by his captive birds, which were calling to them.

The **Budgerigar** was another species that Clark had a fondness for and kept very successfully in his aviaries, where he believed that one pair had reared 26 young in one season. While wild Budgerigars were seen intermittently, as one colonist from 1836 attested, in some years they were very plentiful on the Adelaide Plains and wild birds were trapped in the Reedbeds, at Norwood and at Glenelg. In 1867 the landlord at the Hindmarsh Hotel who was also a bird dealer had nearly 30,000 birds of this species for sale. Clark (1889) worried that this number of birds being taken would deplete the wild population as well as arousing his concern about the welfare of such large numbers of bird crammed into cages without adequate ventilation, food and water. The diary notes of Clark indicated that numbers of visiting Budgerigars dropped in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (SLSA PRG 389/7). Small numbers were seen in some years at Hazelwood, for example in most years of the 1860s, less commonly in the 1870s (1871 and 1878) and 1880s (1880 only). In January 1899 Clark said that there were a few Budgerigars about but it was many years since he had seen them at Burnside. Budgerigars were seen in most months of the year at Burnside, but the majority of the records were in the October to January period, coinciding with the species’ incursion into the southern parts of the state.

A bird that is now extinct in South Australia, the **Ground Parrot**, was probably seen by Symond Clark “in the scrub between Willunga and Port Elliot” (Clark 1889).



Figure 9 – Crimson (Adelaide) Rosella
(Image by Kevin Williams and used courtesy of the photographer and the Birds SA website photographic gallery)

White (1919) called the **Adelaide Rosella** (Figure 9) once a common bird at the Reedbeds, visiting the Adelaide Plains in the autumn, and “exceedingly numerous” in the MLR (White in Mathews 1916-17). However due to their depredations in the orchards, they were shot and poisoned in their thousands. Crompton (1915) said that there were always a few present at Stonyfell, with numbers increasing in recent years, but Clark’s experience at Hazelwood was different. He recorded a young bird in January 1863, heard a bird in August 1868 and saw several young birds in March 1878 (SLSA PRG 389/7). He also commented in 1889 that he had not seen a bird of this species on the Plains for a long time. As this species is a relatively large and brightly-plumaged bird, it is difficult to see how Clark could have missed them if they had been around Hazelwood and Knightsbridge, so it may be that the species was more common in the MLR and Stonyfell was just that much closer to the more intact vegetation of the foothills and the ranges. Clark (1889) did record Adelaide Rosellas in numbers at Crafers and beyond in the Adelaide Hills in 1852.

Clark (1889) described the **Red-rumped Parrot** as frequently seen at Burnside, and sometimes in very large flocks; however, Crompton (1915) said that this species used to be very plentiful at Stonyfell but disappeared in the early 1880s and none had been seen since. On perusing Clark’s diaries, there are very few records of this species, with two sightings in the 1860s and then a flock of 50 birds in mid-December 1878, the largest number seen at any one time (SLSA PRG 389/7). He then commented that in February 1888 there were very few Red-rumped Parrots about. White (1919), writing about the Reedbeds, described the species as once very plentiful, but that it had disappeared. So apparently, this once plentiful bird became very scarce on the Plains, at least for a period.

Clark recorded very few *Neophema* parrots at Hazelwood and was clearly unable to distinguish the

different species (Clark 1889). The following excerpt from his diary for 7th November 1868 illustrated his confusion: “This afternoon a boy named Lucas killed with a stone a beautiful Parroquet which I think from the quantity of deep blue upon the wings and from the orange colour upon the belly must have been the Orange bellied Parroquet (*Euphemia aurantia*). The colours were very brilliant, a narrow band of blue across the forehead and a patch of very deep rich blue on the shoulder. The tail was knocked off and I did not see it. I believe that I once saw a pair of these birds at Hazelwood more than 7 years ago” (SLSA PRG 389/7). Given the time of year, November, this bird was unlikely to have been an **Orange-bellied Parrot**, as the species breeds in Tasmania and is only on the mainland during the winter. From the description the bird was more likely to have been a **Blue-winged Parrot**, but without the specimen it is impossible to tell whether it was this species or the very similar **Elegant Parrot**.

John Gould saw the Orange-bellied Parrot and described it as “abundant on the flat, marshy grounds bordering the coast, especially between Port Adelaide and Holdfast Bay” (Gould 1865). It appears that this species became extinct there quite soon after European colonisation as neither S.A. White nor J.W. Mellor nor White’s ancestors mentioned seeing this species (Paton 2021). The Elegant and Blue-winged Parrots are still recorded in small numbers from the Adelaide Plains, with the former being more common than the latter.

Of particular interest are Clark’s records of two species that are now rare or extinct in the Adelaide region, namely the Little Lorikeet and the **Swift Parrot**. The latter, listed as Critically Endangered in Australia under the *EPBC Act 1999*, breeds in Tasmania and migrates to the mainland, where before 1950 it used to regularly visit the MLR (Commonwealth of Australia 2019). Clark recorded them between May and September in some years between 1854/55 and 1882 (namely 1862, 1864, 1868, 1870, 1871, 1874, 1876, 1878, 1879) and he noted on 13th July 1882 that he had seen large numbers over the last month, including a flock of about 100 (SLSA PRG 389/7). On 17th July 1914, when Edwin Ashby brought him specimens of a male and a female shot by his son at Blackwood (along with an additional five female birds), Clark recalled that he had not heard of any being seen since 1882, although Robert Crompton thought he might have seen two at Kensington Gardens in June 1914. Ashby (1914) reported small flocks from June 1914 at Blackwood flying over and roosting in the Grey Box *Eucalyptus microcarpa* trees, and possibly feeding on flowering South Australian Blue Gums *Eucalyptus leucoxylon*.

Horton and Black (2006) concluded that the **Little Lorikeet** was once a common bird in the MLR and on the Adelaide Plains, but that it is now an extremely rare bird in South Australia, except in the

South East, where it is nonetheless rare. Their conclusion that it was once common in the Adelaide region was partly based on Symonds Clark's publication (1889) as well as those of other earlier and contemporaneous observers. Clark inferred that Little Lorikeets were seasonal in their visits to Hazelwood, sometimes arriving about the time that almonds began blossoming in late winter. For example he first saw them in the blossom in 1864 on 31st July and recorded them using the almond blossom in 1863, 1874 and 1875, but noted that there were none there in 1879. Although there were numbers of Purple-crowned and Musk Lorikeets at Hazelwood in April 1882, there were no Little Lorikeets with them. Horton and Black (2006) questioned whether Little Lorikeets bred in the Adelaide region, despite documented evidence from the MLR. Clark recorded that J. H. Crompton had a young one about the house (and I assume by this he meant the Crompton's Stonyfell house) in December 1864, suggesting that the species did breed in the foothills, at least in some years (SLSA PRG 389/7).

Three other lorikeet species were recorded by Clark and were at least seasonally common on the Adelaide Plains. Clark (1889) believed the Musk Lorikeet to be more common and bolder than the Rainbow Lorikeet, but that the Purple-crowned Lorikeet was the most common lorikeet on the Plains. Another early observer only recorded two species of small lorikeets from the Plains south of Adelaide (around Fullarton, Malvern, Highgate and Unley) in the 1870s and 1880s and described them thus:

Of the birds the most numerous was the smaller green parakeet. These at some seasons of the year existed in thousands, the peppermint gum [i.e. Grey Box] being their favorite [sic] tree. There was a larger variety with a harsher note and more brilliantly colored [sic]. Both these species are now much reduced in numbers (Thomas 1922).

It is possible that Thomas (1922) did not discriminate the Little and the Purple-crowned Lorikeets and thus his larger lorikeet may have been the Musk and the smaller either or both of the aforementioned species. The larger one was not the Rainbow Lorikeet, which he referred to as the 'blue mountain lory'.

Symonds Clark (1889) saw very large flocks, up to 100 birds, of **Rainbow Lorikeets** when he lived in Kensington in 1852. He thought that like all the lorikeets, Rainbows were seasonal, with birds starting to appear about February and disappearing about July, although there are a few records from August and September (SLSA PRG 389/7). Clark recorded them in most years in the 1860s and 1870s from Hazelwood, with large numbers noted in April 1863, early June 1864, May 1867 and May 1879. Their numbers dropped off in the middle years of the 1870s and he recorded them less frequently in the 1880s than previously. Eight or nine birds at

Knightsbridge in March 1889 were the first seen for some time. Clark also said that he was not aware that they ate fruit, which seems surprising given the extensive fruit and vine crops at Hazelwood, but perhaps this was due to their rarity, as they are now well known for their fruit-eating propensities.



Figure 10 – Musk Lorikeets
(Image by Teresa Jack and used courtesy of the photographer and the Birds SA website photographic gallery)

Musk Lorikeets were more common in some years than others at Hazelwood and appeared to be episodic or seasonal in their attendance there. For example, Clark observed that he saw the first for the season on 30th March in 1867, and most of his observations were from the January-March and the June-August periods. They came in late winter to

feed on the almond blossom in some years and at times were destructive in the Hazelwood pear trees (e.g. February 1876). He noted a great many in February 1870, May 1879, June 1871 and 1875, and July 1871. In August 1879 he recorded that there had been a lot in the almond blossom that year and in March 1889 that there were quite a few about but not as many as in the previous year, when in February 1888 he had seen lots at Hazelwood, Kensington and Norwood. In February 1873 he noted that there had been fewer in this year and the last (SLSA PRG 389/7).

At nearby Stonyfell, Crompton (1915) said that the **Purple-crowned Lorikeet** was extremely common when the gum trees were flowering. At Stonyfell and at Burnside there were River Red Gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, SA Blue Gums and Grey Box, with the first named flowering in summer, and the blue gums and the last-named in autumn. At Hazelwood the almond blossom offered rich pickings for the lorikeets and Clark noted the Purple-crowned Lorikeets in the blossom there in 1860, 1862, 1864, 1869, 1870, 1874, and 1875, with first sightings being on the 6th, the 21st and the 27th of July in different years. However, in 1879 he commented that he had not seen any at the blossom that year and there were very few birds in 1874. At other times of the year, he noted many in March of 1863 and 1867, in February-April 1882 and in February 1888, thus mirroring the occurrence of Musk Lorikeets, in that they were more common from late summer through autumn (when the eucalypts were flowering) and in late winter coinciding with the flowering of the almonds.

To be continued in the Summer Birder