

Historical Series No 78.

Matthew Symonds Clark (1839-1920)

Part 4 by Penny Paton

Mammals and reptiles mentioned in the diaries

I found it quite heartbreaking to read of the mammals that Symonds Clark saw in the early years of his residency in the colony of South Australia as it reminded me of how much of our mammal fauna we have lost in this state and country.

The only mention I found in the diaries of an echidna (**Short-beaked Echidna** *Tachyglossus aculeatus*) is from 22nd August 1860 when Clark says that he saw one at Professor Hall's. I first assumed that this was a wild animal but, on reading up on the 'Professor', I soon realised that it was more likely to have been a captive animal. 'Professor' Robert Hall was an early Adelaide photographer, naturalist and personality and brought back an echidna from Mount Schank in 1845 (www 6). This animal lived a short time only, but it suggests that Hall was a collector and therefore any animal Clark saw at his premises was not a wild one.

Common Brushtail Possums *Trichosurus vulpecula* were very common at Hazelwood and in fact were trapped and shot in very large numbers, no doubt due to their depredations on the fruit in the orchard and their herbivory in the extensive gardens. Clark mentioned on 26th November 1863 that he had shot one from an almond tree and that its stomach was full of what looked like green almonds. Clark also saw the smaller **Common Ringtail Possums** *Pseudocheirus peregrinus* at Hazelwood and occasionally found them in their nests with young. He tried to keep captive animals with little success.

More interesting to modern readers is the numerous mentions of bandicoots and native cats, often caught in gin traps at the Crompton's place at Stonyfell. These traps were mechanical devices with spring-operated steel jaws, designed to catch animals by their leg. In December 1880 a **Southern Brown Bandicoot** *Isodon obesulus* was caught by hand at Stonyfell and Clark saw this very large animal in a cage there. It was the only live bandicoot he had ever seen and he was amazed by its length. When stretched out, its body measured over a foot (30cm) and its tail was another 8 inches (20cm) long. Although much reduced in range and abundance, these bandicoots persist in small numbers in the Mount Lofty Ranges and the South East of South Australia.

In late August 1867 H. Martin gave Clark a native cat (**Eastern Quoll** *Dasyurus viverrimus*), the first female that he had ever examined, and he removed the head to save the skull. This skull is the second- oldest mammalian specimen in the South Australian Museum (SAMA) (as mentioned in an earlier part of this series). In October 1882 Clark was shown two dead native cats that had been caught in traps at Hazelwood, despite his never having seen a live animal there. He took one of the bodies to the museum, but it was unsuitable for a skin, having broken legs and a crushed skull. A few years later on 28th April 1887 Symonds' son Edward set a trap for and caught a native cat at Port Willunga, after noises were heard under the floor of the house. In the same month Symonds Clark had seen four native cats in a dry underground tank at Trinity near Morphett Vale by Dr Kelly's old wine cellar. Like so many native mammals, this species is extinct in the wild in this state, and probably on the mainland of Australia.

Early on in the Clark family's residency at Burnside, a dead male **Brush-tailed Bettong** *Bettongia penicillata* was brought to Symonds Clark on 28th May 1864. The animal had been shot at Kensington on the evening of 19th May. The only other record of bettongs that I found in the diaries was of two animals disturbed by Clark's dog Hector when he was walking from Chambers Creek below the waterfall to the Green Hill Road near the Little



Eastern Quoll (*Dasyurus viverrimus*)

Photographed by Michael Baritt

Mount Lofty on 19th January 1868. Described by Wood Jones (1923-25) as “extremely common over the greater part of South Australia” only a few years previously, this species is extinct in the wild in this state now. This is perhaps not surprising as Wood Jones (1923-1925) also recounts that at the turn of the century Adelaide dealers sold live animals “by the dozens at about ninepence (about 10c) per head for coursing on Sundays.”

While it is not clear from the diaries whether Symonds Clark saw a live bilby, he recounted that on 15th December 1867 on Gilles Plains about 4 miles from Adelaide he found the skull of what he called a Native Hare *Peragala lagotis*. We now know that this was the **Bilby** *Macrotis lagotis*, once so common close to Adelaide that Pinky Flat on the River Torrens is said to have been named from the abundance of Bilbies there. The other record in his diaries of this species is somewhat enigmatic and I reproduce it in full as I find it hard to interpret. “Sept 11 1868 – at Marrabel ... There were many native hares (*Peragala lagotis*) in the immediate neighbourhood of the township which George Fuller Hack had increased during the last year xxx [could not decipher some words] getting quite a nuisance from their making so many holes in the ground.” Wood Jones (1923-25) noted that even in the last years of the nineteenth century it was usual for rabbit trappers to catch more bilbies than rabbits, even close to Adelaide. The last stronghold in South Australia was around Nalpa but Wood Jones (1923-25) suspected that by the 1920s bilbies were extinct in this state.

In February 1883 H. W. Crompton gave Clark the body of a **Water Rat** *Hydromys chrysogaster* that was killed near the creek on Hazelwood. The animal was killed because it was thought to be an introduced rat and Crompton’s intention was to take the body to the museum. From Clark’s description of the animal having a white-tipped tail and yellow underneath there can be no doubt that it was a Water Rat. Another Water Rat was caught in a gin trap on Hazelwood on 11th June 1886, following depredations on the fruit of an orange tree and Clark took this body to the museum. A near neighbour, Mr Coote, told him that there were many Water Rats in his garden.

Clark does not appear to have seen kangaroos at Hazelwood nor did he see many in the Mount Lofty Ranges. However when at Marrabel on 11th September 1868 he was told of sooty or black kangaroos there and he obtained the head of one shot in the scrub, 12 miles (about 20km) from Marrabel. I assume this was a particularly dark specimen of the **Western Grey Kangaroo** *Macropus fuliginosus*.

On a visit to the South East in May and June 1882, Clark saw a macropod that he was told was a **Toolache Wallaby** *Macropus greyi* near Kingston. The animal stood about 3 feet (about 1m) tall, was predominantly grey with reddish brown about the head. This description also fits the **Red-necked**

Wallaby *Macropus rufogriseus*, which is also found in the South East of our state. The Toolache Wallaby is extinct, with the last wild specimens seen near Robe in 1927 (Menkhorst and Knight 2016).

The other reference to macropods in the diaries was the entry for 28th and 31st April 1871, where Clark reported that a farmer on Kangaroo Island, William Holmes Hamilton, noted that there were a few kangaroos on the Island still and that wallabies [**Tammar Wallaby** *Macropus eugenii*], which were formerly so plentiful, were now much scarcer.

Of the introduced mammals, Clark was told by Mr J. Gilbert and his son that 3 to 5 hares [**European Hare** *Lepus europeus*] were released at Pewsey Vale in about 1863. By 1871, when Clark visited the area, their numbers had increased to the extent that they had found their way to Williamstown and the Glen Para. The species was partially protected but Mr Gilbert had shot 37 between April and June of 1871, prior to the closed season starting in July.

Rabbits [**European Rabbit** *Oryctolagus cuniculus*] are mentioned infrequently in the diaries and I have assumed therefore that they were not at Burnside in Clark’s lifetime. However he did say that in May 1869 when he travelled to Gawler and Lyndoch that he thought he saw a rabbit and was told that there were many rabbits in the scrub. Then in June 1886 on a trip to Blanchetown, he saw a few rabbits in different places but was told that they were comparatively scarce now.

Reptiles are rarely mentioned, but in October 1863 Clark saw a snake of “the common brown species” at Knightsbridge and in October 1875 he saw several brown snakes [presumably **Eastern Brown Snake** *Pseudonaja textilis*] by the reservoir at Hazelwood. He also commented that S.M.C. [probably Susan Mary Crompton] had told him that about 200 snakes had been killed at Stonyfell that season and that men digging the vineyard there had killed 17 in one day. This suggests that at one time brown snakes were extremely common in the foothills near Adelaide.

The only other reptile that I noted in the diaries was a February 1887 record at Hazelwood of a young monitor lizard about two feet long, a species that Clark did not think he had ever seen there before. Given the habitat I think it likely that this was a **Heath Goanna** *Varanus rosenbergi*, now listed as Vulnerable in South Australia and Critically Endangered in the Mount Lofty Ranges region.

Symonds Clark and the SAOA

Symonds Clark was a foundation member of the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA), which was formed in 1899, and there are a few references to him in the Journal. An excerpt from his paper on the parrot tribe (Clark 1889) on the Swift Parrot was reprinted in the SAOA (Clark 1914a). Other than this short paper the other references were

all letters. In 1914, he wrote two letters to the editors, the first one requesting that reports from the SAOA general meetings be published in the journal, rather than just the notice of the Annual Meetings (Clark 1914b). He also asked that when a new name for an old species was used that it should be followed by the name given by Gould, using the example of the White-plumed Honeyeater *Ptilotis penicillata*. He thought that many members would have Gould's (1865) publication but not necessarily Mathews' newest list. The Editors added a note after his letter to the effect that an extract of all the minutes from the meetings would be published but were silent on his other request. His second letter responded to statements in published works that Cockatiels were unable to raise and lower their crests. Having kept this species in captivity for many years, he was adamant that they were able to move their crests, generally having the crest erect when perched, but depressed when feeding on the ground.

Gregory Mathews (1915) responded to Clark's letter about nomenclature, pointing out that Clark was in error in his letter in saying that Gould had named *Ptilotus penicillata* from South Australian specimens. In fact in reading Gould (1865), Mathews found that Gould had given the habitat of this species as "Australia: locality, interior of New South Wales" and does not mention South Australia at all.

Aviary birds

As noted earlier, Clark had extensive aviaries and kept a wide range of birds and, on occasions, other animals in captivity. His success at keeping animals alive in captivity was constrained by lack of knowledge about what to feed them. No doubt he became more skilled over his long avicultural career and he kept some birds for many years. In May 1863 he purchased two bronzewings, one Common and one Brush, and the Common Bronzewing survived until May 1892, a life span of at least 29 years. He also kept for over 30 years a Little Corella *Cacatua sanguinea* that was an important member of the family.

From an early age, Clark spent much time visiting live animal dealers in Adelaide city and often noted in his diaries what he had seen and the price that the dealer was asking. He purchased many birds over the years and always noted such purchases in the diaries. In 1863 he bought some parrots from F. Lamb's shop in Hindley Street and in the late 1880s and early 1890s he favoured Foglia's shop in Rundle Street. Foglia was the largest bird dealer in Adelaide and in 1905 had been in business longer than any of his competitors. The scale of dealing in birds is hard to imagine in the twenty first century; Foglia had collected 14,000 birds for export in 1905 (www 9).

An entry in the diaries for 10th January 1916 indicated that Clark gave all his aviary birds, apart from his corella, to Sidney Angel and it appears that he was

not at Knightsbridge when this occurred. John Sutton's belief that Clark lived for a time at Belair may be the explanation for this.



Water Rat (*Hydromys chrysogaster*)

Photographed by ZooPro, 20 May 2000,
Dubbo NSW.

Last years and death

The SAOA Correspondence (SLSA SRG 652) includes a hand-written letter from Symonds Clark to the Secretary, Robert Crompton, dated 25th February 1914, regretting his inability to attend the SAOA meeting at which Mathews was to be present. The reason given was ill health. Clark's gift of all his aviary birds, bar his favourite corella, to Angel in early 1916 and possible move to Belair at about this time, reinforces the notion that he was in poor health during his last years. Horton *et al.* (2018) said that, after several years of poor health, Symonds Clark died of tuberculosis on 10th July 1920 at his home in Knightsbridge. This scourge of the Clark family led to the premature death of five of Francis and Caroline's sons, two in England and three in Australia.

A stained-glass window was installed in memory of Symonds and Effie in 1948 in the Unitarian Church in Wakefield Street (www 2). This window depicted the Parable of the Good Samaritan and was the work of one of the few Australian women stained-glass artists, Nora Burden. When the Unitarian Church was demolished in 1973 the stained-glass windows and organ were incorporated into the new Church built on Osmond Terrace at Norwood in the 1970s (www 8). Even into her 90s Effie was a familiar figure in the streets of Knightsbridge in an old-fashioned bonnet and holding a stick and, although almost blind, she kept busy cutting up old fabric to stuff cushions (www 3). Symonds and Effie are buried in the Clark family vault in West Terrace Cemetery (Brown 1999).

For further information on the remarkable Clark and Martin families see *The Hatbox Letters* (Members and Friends of the Martin and Clark Families 1999).

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Appendix

SLSA PRG 389/7

Volume 1: 14 December 1862 – 31 December 1863; transcribed SLSA; transcribed J. Sutton, SAMA.

Volume 2: 2 January 1864 – 17 January 1865; transcribed J. Sutton, SAMA.

Volume 3: ca February 1865 – ca October 1867.

Volume 4: 12 October 1867 – 2 January 1870.

Volume 5: 5 January 1870 – 22 March 1875; transcribed J. Sutton, SAMA.

Volume 6: 22 June 1875 – 30 June 1890; transcribed J. Sutton, SAMA.

Volume 7: 19 July 1890 – 28 February 1919 at one end and 10 January 1916 at other; transcribed J. Sutton, SAMA from 19/7/1890 – 10/1/1916.

Volume 8: 18 October 1877 – 29 November 1877; mostly about plants and trip to Tasmania.

Volume 9: 3 September 1859 – 8 December 1862.