

OBITUARY: GORDON BEAUMONT RAGLESS 1909–2002

Gordon Ragless was born at Edwardstown on 2 June 1909. He was educated at Sturt Primary and Pulteney Grammar Schools. Subsequently he worked on the family property, engaged mainly in horticultural pursuits and later established his own property, concentrating mainly on almonds, in which he became expert, publishing a number of articles on the subject in the *Journal of Agriculture*. He was president of the Marion branch of the Fruitgrowers and Market Gardeners Association during 1944–49 and for the next three years headed the State Association. He was also a foundation member of the Almond Cooperative Society and a member of the Wine Grape Growers Council of SA 1945–53. During 1952–75 he was a member of the Fruit Fly Compensation Committee and was pleased that his ornithological knowledge at times helped to thwart spurious claims about the effects of spraying on domestic poultry.

He became a foundation member of the Blackwood Radio Club in 1923 and served on the council of the SA Division of the Wireless Institute of Australia for a number of years. Shortly after the outbreak of war he joined a security radio listening post at Somerton Park, where he and three others maintained a 24-hour service monitoring Morse-code signals. Atmospheric conditions meant that Adelaide sometimes picked up signals not heard elsewhere, e.g. they were the first to report the landing of the Japanese in New Guinea. A steadily growing interest in the history and geography of the state induced him in later years to become a member of several societies concerned with these matters. Being keenly interested in literature, he gathered an extensive library on many of these subjects.

His interest in ornithology did not commence until 1950 when, as a result of acquaintance with

J.N. McGilp, he began an egg collection. He joined the SAOA, becoming Vice-President in 1956 and President during 1957–60. He served as the SAOA Auditor 1960–70 and was made an Honorary Member in 1985. He also joined the RAOU, being State Representative 1965–69 and acting Branch Secretary 1966–67. He was a founding member of the Adelaide Ornithologists' Club where he served as Vice-President 1970–71 and President 1971–73. His egg-collecting led to a request from Charles Sibley in the USA to forward albumen samples for research into

phylogenetic relationships of the world's birds. This commenced in 1971 but by 1974 Sibley changed to DNA analysis of blood samples. While unable to participate in taking blood samples, Gordon organised several others to assist and he remained a valued associate, being acknowledged in many of Sibley's papers, including the final work (Sibley and Ahlquist 1990).

Acquaintance with older ornithologists like J.N. McGilp, F.E. Parsons, S.A. White, H.J. Morton and R.G. Ribbons coupled with a penchant for history and literature resulted in him gaining quickly a good appreciation of the distribution and breeding range of the state's birds. His expertise was soon recognised by Shane Parker who consulted him often when Parker first came to South Australia. When Shane became Curator of Birds at the SA Museum he had Gordon made an Honorary Research Associate in Ornithology at the museum. Gordon's talents at identifying eggs and nests were utilised there and he was a major contributor when the nest collection was expanded under Shane's direction. His knowledge of nest construction and likely site-choice was unrivalled in recent times and his passing will leave a void in this regard unlikely to be filled.



The challenge of finding cryptic-nesting birds appealed to him. The crakes, rails, fieldwrens and grasswrens were among species of special interest. He and H.J. Morton did much to show that there were reasonable numbers of Thick-billed Grasswren *Amytornis textilis* in the Lyndhurst area after being unreported for several decades. While searching for this species he achieved the triumph of his career in discovering the previously-unknown nest and eggs of the Chestnut-breasted Whiteface *Aphelocephala pectoralis* (see Ragless 1969). Finding the Chestnut Rail *Eulabeornis castaneoventris* breeding at Darwin gave him as much pleasure, particularly as the CSIRO staff there were sceptical of his first report (see Ragless 1977). In the 1960s he gave particular attention to the Flinders Ranges race *merrotsyi* of the Striated Grasswren *Amytornis striatus*, to the extent of seeking out and corresponding with Merrotsy's relatives. Few shared his enthusiasm then, but the position has now changed considerably since its recent separation as a full species, the Short-tailed Grasswren *Amytornis merrotsyi*.

Although well aware that he was disliked in some quarters because of the more recent stigma associated with egg-collecting, he continued to be involved in many ornithological activities and considered it important to write articles and share his ornithological knowledge. He was quite generous in taking people, including many of today's ornithologists, inland to see grasswrens and other species with which he was familiar. Gordon was amused by the rumour that he had exterminated the Mt Lofty Ranges Spotted Quail-Thrush *Cinlosoma punctatum anachoreta* when, in fact, he had never taken its eggs.

Gordon generously donated his egg collection of 4,000–5,000 clutches to the Australian National Wildlife Collection, Canberra. Although some believed that all or part of it should have stayed within South Australia, Gordon was determined to honour the pledge he made in the early 1960s that his collection go to the CSIRO in return for assistance, first by Warren Hitchcock and later by Richard Schodde, both former South Australians. The Ragless egg collection was highly regarded, containing eggs of over 90% of Australia's breeding birds as well as many

of the migratory species obtained chiefly through Charles Sibley in reward for assistance given.

P. and J. Olsen were given access to the collection for their work on eggshell thinning due to chemical residues, especially DDT, in raptors (see Olsen and Olsen 1979). The opportunity to compare historic and more recent material was vital to their study. Gordon had systematically taken eggs biennially from Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* breeding in territories on the southern Fleurieu Peninsula. He claimed that individuals consistently laid a similar egg-pattern, e.g. a bird laying eggs with a pale background always laid pale eggs. Thus he deduced that one female had bred in the same territory for nearly 30 years, her eggs becoming smaller as she aged. This work remains unpublished.

He is survived by wife Sylvia, two sons and a daughter and to them we extend our sympathy. Other Ragless relatives still reside in the Flinders Ranges.

The pastoral country of the inland with its combination of interesting birds to search for and affiliations with his pioneering ancestors held a strong allure. He became acquainted with many property owners and sought out many places of historical interest during his excursions. Two lines from the poem *In the Droving Days* by Banjo Patterson provide a suitable epitaph:

For those that love it and understand
the saltbush plain is a wonderland.

Anyone fortunate enough to accompany him to the Lyndhurst country would know that Gordon Ragless understood.

REFERENCES

- Olsen, P. and Olsen, J. 1979. Eggshell thinning in the peregrine, *Falco peregrinus* (Aves: Falconidae), in Australia. *Australian Wildlife Research*, 6, 217-226.
- Ragless, G.B. 1969. Nest and eggs of the Chestnut-breasted Whiteface. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 25, 98-99.
- Ragless, G.B. 1977. The Chestnut Rail at Darwin. *South Australian Ornithologist*, 27, 254-255.
- Sibley C.G. and Ahlquist, J.E. 1990. *Phylogeny and classification of birds: a study in molecular evolution*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

JOHN ECKERT