



## Arthur Mattingley, Mathoura and a millinery war

Around Christmas in 1906 a man named Arthur Mattingley paid a return visit to Mathoura.

Mattingley was a keen photographer and had with him a half plate camera, a cumbersome affair compared to modern digital cameras but one capable of taking high quality photos.

He was at the time the Secretary of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union and a very competent cameraman, described in *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* as "a pioneer of Australian bird photography."

He had been to Mathoura in November, a trip, which lasted ten days. Camping out in the wetlands he took many photos of the water-birds which included ibis, herons, spoonbills and egrets. But the baby egrets were not yet hatched and Mattingley decided on a return visit because he wanted a picture of an egret feeding its young.

He got that and more. The photos that he took on that Christmas trip shocked Australia and had considerable influence around the world.

Egrets are amongst the world's most beautiful and graceful water birds. During the breeding season both male and female adults grow long, gauzy plumes on their backs which, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were in great demand as decorations for ladies' hats.

The early 1900s were also a time of growing awareness of conservation issues. Special places were being preserved through the recently-introduced concept of national parks. People like Mattingley were beginning to understand ecology – the inter-dependency of species and their relationship to the environment – and to question the morality of sportsmen shooting at anything that moved. But Mattingley was a practical conservationist, seeing the value of biodiversity in terms of its benefits to all species, man included. He once dissected an ibis, counted the insects in its stomach and calculated that the estimated one million birds in the region were destroying more than two billion grasshoppers and other pests each day.

On his previous visit Mattingley and a companion had camped near a major egret hatchery in the St Helena swamp bordering the Edward river. He lost no time heading to it but as he approached:

*...we could see some large patches of white, either floating in the air or reclining on the fallen trees in the vicinity of the egrets' rookery...*

*There, strewn on the floating water-weed, and also on adjacent logs, were at least 50 carcasses of large White and smaller Plumed Egrets—nearly one third of the rookery, perhaps more—the birds having been shot off their nests containing young. What a holocaust! Plundered for their plumes. What a monument of human callousness! There were 50 birds ruthlessly destroyed, besides their young (about 200) left to die of starvation!*



A hat from 1911 adorned with egret plumes. Arthur Mattingley was outraged by the killing of birds to supply the feather trade.

The savage destruction of birds so that ladies might wear fashionable hats turned the bird fancier – described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as “a rather stern man” – into a raging crusader. Mattingley had enlargements of his pictures displayed in Melbourne shop windows. He wrote an article denouncing the plume trade. It was published in *The Emu* – in those days the Australian birdwatchers' bible.

The story was picked up by most of the nation's major newspapers which also told readers where they could see Mattingley's dramatic photos.

In the following year Mattingley and a delegation of prominent ornithologists met with the Australian Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin. He doubted he could stop the trade through legislation but immediately appealed to Australian women “to save the lives of thousands of innocent birds” by refusing to buy feathered hats.

By 1909 Mattingley's crusade had gone international. Photographs which he supplied to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in London were reproduced as a special supplement in the society's quarterly magazine *Bird Notes and News*.

London was the centre of the international plume trade and the RSPB had been trying to shut down the trade in rare bird feathers for several years. But the industry had always countered the society's claims, denying birds were being shot and accusing the society of not knowing how the feathers were obtained.

Now, for the first time, there was photographic evidence and the society used the images at every opportunity. They organised displays and had booklets printed in several languages for distribution throughout Europe. One Melbourne bird-watcher returning from a world tour told the Melbourne *Argus* he had seen Mattingley's photos at an exhibition in Vienna.

Thirty thousand German women were said to have signed a pledge to never again wear the feathers of egrets or birds of paradise.

The London-based RSPB made Mattingley a life member.

Gradually the campaign took effect. Laws banning the importation of feathers were passed.

In 1925 a hawk-eyed customs officer in Melbourne ordered a disembarking tourist to remove her plumed hat and place it in bond until she was leaving the country. It was a prohibited import.

So effective had Mattingley's Mathoura photos been that by 1946, four years before the naturalist's death, an unidentified writer in a north Queensland newspaper noted “The photographs which finally sealed the fate of the plume-traders were taken by A. H. E. Mattingley and published widely in Australia and abroad.”



This photograph of starving baby egrets, taken by Arthur Mattingley near Mathoura, was one of those shown around the world which helped stop the brutal destruction of rare birds for their feathers.

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