

# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Chairman's Message

I am delighted to announce that, after a long gap, we are about to publish the latest volume in the highly regarded Checklist series, and the first under the editorship of David Wells. Checklist no. 25 will cover the birds of the Falkland Islands. This authoritative volume by Robin W Woods covers all 205 species that have been reliably recorded in the Falklands, plus another 54 species whose presence is unconfirmed. This comprehensive checklist will undoubtedly become the definitive work on the status of birds in the Falklands. The publication details will be placed online as soon as they become available.

Chris Storey

The 985th meeting of the Club was held on Monday 13 March 2017 in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE. Eleven members and six non-members were present. Members attending were: Miss H. Baker, Mr P. Belman, Mr M. Earp, Dr J. Hume (*Speaker*), Mr R. Langley, Dr C. F. Mann, Mr. D. J. Montier, Dr R. Prŷs-Jones, Dr P. Rudge, Dr A. Simmons and Mr C. W. R Storey (*Chairman*).

Non-members attending were: Ms A. H. Belman, Mrs M. Montier, Mr D. Prŷs-Jones, Mr O. Prŷs-Jones, Ms Z. Varley and Ms J. White.

Julian Hume gave a talk entitled *In search of the dwarf emu: extinct emus of Australian islands*. King Island, in the Bass Strait, and Kangaroo Island, off South Australia, were once home to endemic species of dwarf emu that became extinct in the early 19th century. The King Island Emu *Dromaius minor* is known from subfossil remains and a unique skin, whereas the Kangaroo Island Emu *D. baudinianus* is known from subfossil bones, a unique egg, and a contemporary illustration. A further subspecies of emu, *D. novaehollandiae diemenensis*, formerly inhabited Tasmania, from where it is represented by two skins and a number of eggs, but is virtually unknown in the fossil record. An emu egg shell has also been found on another Bass Strait island, Flinders Island, which suggests that yet another emu species may have formerly occurred there.

Despite the comparatively large number of emu subfossil remains collected on King and Kangaroo Islands, virtually no contextual data concerning the fossil depositional environments have been obtained. Furthermore, and because of the introduction of mainland emus *D. n. novaehollandiae* to the Australian islands after the endemic forms became extinct, the reliability of the known skins and eggs, especially those from Tasmania, have been placed in doubt.

To overcome this shortfall, Julian travelled to all of the Australian islands to search for palaeontological evidence of emus. On King Island in 1906, J. A. Kershaw undertook the first paleontological survey, and found emu bones in sand dunes in the south of the island. The available results included a photograph of the locality, but Kershaw gave no further information as to its whereabouts. This photograph proved decisive, as Julian and his colleagues discovered the exact site where Kershaw had been 110 years before. Furthermore, other fossil localities were discovered in the west and north of the island, which are the first in-situ recorded examples of emu remains. The visit to Kangaroo Island also proved successful, with in-situ emu subfossils discovered in two cave localities, and one in particular proved to be especially productive; this included beautifully preserved cranial material. Flinders Island was also surveyed, but despite searching the few cave systems and extensive sand dunes, not a single piece of evidence was found to support the presence of emus on the island. It is likely, therefore, that the aforementioned egg shell was probably derived from an imported mainland emu. Finally, and probably most exciting of all, was the discovery of an almost complete, associated *D. novaehollandiae diemenensis* in a cave by a colleague, Roland Eberhard. This is the first known, and its study should resolve the taxonomic status of this most mysterious of all emus.

Results from the field work, presently being written up, should finally shed light on some of the long confusing issues concerning these enigmatic, extinct island forms.