

Removal of Black Crake *Amaurornis flavirostris* from the Western Palearctic list, and the first record of Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata* for Madeira

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SUMMARY.—Here I describe the rediscovery of a forgotten specimen originally identified as a Black Crake *Amaurornis flavirostris*, collected on Madeira in January 1895, the sole record of this species for the Western Palearctic. However, the specimen was reidentified as a Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata*, the first record for Macaronesia, and the fourth for the Western Palearctic.

Black Crake *Amaurornis flavirostris* occurs throughout sub-Saharan Africa, where it generally is a common resident, which undertakes only local movements (Urban *et al.* 1986). The northernmost limit of its range is south-west Mauritania (Borrow & Demey 2001). There is a single record for the Western Palearctic, a male collected on Madeira (at Santo Amaro, near Funchal), on 29 January 1895 (Cramp 1980).

The specimen was prepared by Padre Ernesto João Schmitz and originally formed part of the ornithological collection of Funchal seminary (Museu do Seminário do Funchal, MADS). Translated from the German (Schmitz 1896), its discovery was described thus: '26 January 1895: today I received a bird recalling a Moorhen but much smaller; can it be a Spotted Crake [*Porzana porzana*]?' Three years later, Schmitz (1899) included *Limnocorax niger* (*Amaurornis flavirostris*) on his list of the birds of Madeira, writing: 'The first and only time this bird was collected was on the 26.1.1895. It was a male and was caught in S. Amaro'. Both accounts refer to the same individual, as no other birds were caught on that date according to Schmitz's writings. Seventy years later, Bannerman & Bannerman (1965) wrote: 'This record is very unexpected, but in view of the data published by Padre Schmitz [...] we must undoubtedly accept it as a genuine vagrant from the west coast of Africa [...] If it was preserved at one time in the Seminário Museum, the skin has been lost.'

Schmitz (1845–1922) was a prominent naturalist of the time. Of German birth, he first came to Funchal, Madeira, as a chaplain in 1874, became established in 1878 and took Portuguese citizenship thereafter. He left Madeira in late 1908, never to return, going to Jerusalem and then Haifa, where he died (Silva & Menezes 1940). Especially between 1882 (when he founded the Museu do Seminário do Funchal) and 1908, he gathered much important information on the birds of the archipelago, building up a collection of hundreds of specimens. This included the first proof of breeding for Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira* (although not recognised as such at the time: Zino & Zino 1986) and records of many new taxa for Madeira (e.g. Schmitz 1899, 1903; see also Zino *et al.* 1995).

The collection was originally housed at the Museu do Seminário do Funchal, but after Schmitz left Madeira the entire collection (and museum) was moved several times (until 1982), and for a period its whereabouts appear to have been uncertain, but probably in warehouses belonging to the church (Silva & Menezes 1940; R. Jardim *in litt.*). This may explain why D. A. Bannerman never got to see Schmitz's specimens as, in his work on the birds of Madeira, he states that 'they had been allowed to fall into decay. The majority indeed seems to have perished. [...] Its loss is a sore blow' (Bannerman & Bannerman 1965).



Figure 1. Comparison of the Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata* specimen from Madeira, with a Common Moorhen *G. chloropus* from the same collection (MADS-a262) (Rafael Matias)

Figure 2. Detail of the head of the Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata* specimen, showing the distinctly wedge-shaped frontal shield and the bill's colour (Rafael Matias)

By the early 1980s, although a large part of the collection still existed, it was poorly conserved. Because of this, the remainder was sent to the Museu do Jardim Botânico do Funchal, in 1982, where it remains. The collection is still the property of the Diocese of Funchal. The bird specimens presently held in the Museu do Jardim Botânico have been inexplicably neglected by researchers, but a catalogue of the collection is currently being prepared by the author.

On a visit to the Museu do Jardim Botânico do Funchal, on 1 June 2007, a few mounted specimens immediately caught my eye. One was a small rallid, recalling a tiny Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, but clearly an adult Lesser Moorhen *G. angulata* (Figs. 1–2). The specimen could be seen only through the cabinet window and it was not possible to see the original tag, only a more recent red plastic label attached to the wooden base that stated 'Corvo do charco, 29–01–1895'. On a second visit, on 10 September 2007, I was able to examine the original tag, from the seminary collection, which states '*Limnocorax niger* (Gm.) male, S. Amaro 26.1.95'. It is therefore straightforward to conclude that the specimen is the same referred to as the first and only Black Crake for the Western Palearctic, and thought to be 'lost' (Bannerman & Bannerman 1965, Cramp 1980). A full description and series of photographs were taken.

Although much smaller, the bird's general shape recalls that of a Common Moorhen, but with a proportionately larger head and shorter legs (Fig. 1). Bill yellow with a reddish culmen from the frontal shield to the bill tip, and proportionately shorter and more robust than *G. chloropus*. The frontal shield is distinctly wedge-shaped and not rounded as in Common Moorhen (Fig. 2). Overall coloration sooty-grey, darker on the lores, at the bill base and throat (Fig. 2); the wings and scapulars had an olive-brown cast, and upper-flank feathers white on the outer fringes, producing a white line on the flanks; undertail-coverts also white (Fig. 1). Legs yellow (present colour) with no reddish on the tibia. The bare parts of the specimens in this collection do not seem to have ever been painted, as was often common practice. All these characteristics are typical of Lesser Moorhen, and exclude both Black Crake and Common Moorhen (with both of which the author has ample experience). The following measurements (all within published values for the species) were taken with callipers (to 0.1 mm): bill length (upper tip of frontal shield to bill tip) 29.4 mm; head and

bill 46.4 mm; wing 132 mm; primary projection 19.2 mm; middle toe (to tip of claw) 52.6 mm; middle toe (to base of claw) 44.1 mm; tarsus: 38.5 mm.

Several plumage traits, and tarsus length, suggest that the bird is a male. According to Urban *et al.* (1986) mean tarsus length of males is 36.6 mm (range 35–39, $n=9$) and that of females is 36.7 mm (range 36–37, $n=3$). This confirms the original sex determination, presumably made via gonad analysis. After a full renumbering of the seminary collection at the Museu do Jardim Botânico, the specimen is now accessioned under the number MADS-a114.

Black Crake should therefore be removed from the list of birds recorded in the Western Palearctic. Rather, the specimen represents the first Lesser Moorhen for the same region. This species has a similar range to that of Black Crake, occurring throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa (although it is somewhat uncommon and local) as far as northern Senegal (Urban *et al.* 1986).

There are three other published records of Lesser Moorhen for the Western Palearctic, but only one of them is widely accepted as valid (in Egypt, at Lake Nasser in May 1997; Haavisto & Strand 2000). The other two concern singles in southern Spain (origin unknown: Algeciras, Cadiz, 10 March 2003; de Juana *et al.* 2005), and on the Canary Islands (never submitted to a rarities committee: immature, Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, 19 January 1997; Clarke 2006). The date of the Madeira record accords well with the pattern observed for other African vagrants to Europe (Hudson 1974, Alström *et al.* 1991). A juvenile female was recorded off Brazil, on St. Peter and St. Paul Rocks, on 10 January 2005 (Bencke *et al.* 2005), demonstrating that *G. angulata* is even capable of transatlantic vagrancy. This species' movements are apparently triggered mainly by rainfall patterns and water levels at wetlands (Urban *et al.* 1986, Dodman & Diagana 2006).

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