

Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

The 979th meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 10 March 2015 in the upstairs room at The Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE. Sixteen members and four non-members were present. Members attending were: Miss H. Baker, Cdr. M. B. Casement, RN, Mr S. Chapman, Dr R. A. Cheke, Dr C. Fisher (*Speaker*), Mr K. Heron Jones, Mr G. P. Jackson, Mr G. M. Kirwan, Mr R. Langley, Mr R. W. Malin, Mr D. Montier, Mrs A. Moore, Dr R. Prÿs-Jones, Mr N. Redman, Mr S. A. H. Statham and Mr C. W. R. Storey (*Chairman*).

Non-members attending were: Mr R. Borello, Mrs W. Borello, Mrs B. Harrison and Mrs M. Montier.

Clemency Fisher, Senior Curator of Vertebrate Zoology at National Museums Liverpool, spoke on *The jigsaw puzzle with many pieces missing: reconstructing a 19th century bird collection*. Fisher has been researching the collections of the English explorer-naturalist John Gilbert for nearly 40 years. She opened her talk with a picture of Gilbert, a reconstruction based on the few comments that exist concerning his physical appearance—there is no known portrait of him. Despite this, Australians have named a major river, two mountains, a view and an airplane after Gilbert, and many species such as Gilbert's Whistler *Pachycephala inornata*, a small kangaroo and a lizard bear his name. Clem showed a photograph of the large audience, including clergymen of several denominations, who had made their way to the outskirts of Taroom in central Queensland to attend the opening of 'Gilbert's Lookout' in 2004.

Some of Gilbert's avian discoveries, such as Gouldian Finch *Erythrura gouldiae* and Noisy Scrub-bird *Atrichornis clamosus*, are now endangered, and Clem described how individuals of the latter have been successfully translocated to suitable locations based on habitat notes that Gilbert made. She also described the difficulty of pinpointing which of Gilbert's specimens of the scrub-bird was the first he collected, and the one on which Gould based the species. Her instincts tell her it is a specimen in the Museum of Comparative Anatomy at Harvard University, rather than the designated lectotype in the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. This has important implications, especially because of the increasing ability to extract DNA from old specimens.

Clem reviewed the meticulous research that has gone into identifying the type locality of the Paradise Parrot *Psephotus pulcherrimus*, sadly now extinct, which Gilbert discovered on the Darling Downs of southern Queensland. The date (and thereby the exact locality) Gilbert and his friend Charles Coxen first collected this beautiful parrot, 17 May 1844, was discovered by Clem and Ian McAllan by reading Gilbert's faded pencil diary entry from a copy on microfilm. This could be backlit, whereas the original diary entry looks completely blank. The date, 17 May 1844, is recorded on Gilbert's original label on an adult male now in National Museums Liverpool, but the designated lectotype in Philadelphia has no original label and no collecting date, and therefore cannot be proved to have any type status.

Gilbert collected in many locations in Australia, but his most important site was the tiny British naval colony of Port Essington, on the north coast. Here he collected thousands of specimens, including many birds. A Bush Stone-curlew *Burhinus grallarius* skeleton prepared by Gilbert lay ignored in one museum because the glass lid of the box had been incorrectly swapped with that of another, data-less specimen. Gilbert collected eggs and nests; his employer, John Gould, split the clutches up and sold them to different collectors. Some clutches are now divided between museums in the Netherlands, California, Connecticut and Hertfordshire, and can only be reunited by comparing Gilbert's writing on the eggs, made difficult by the blobs of old glue that often obscure this.

Gilbert's final expedition was undertaken as a member of the First Leichhardt Expedition of 1844–45, the first party of Europeans to cross Australia. On this important expedition Gilbert collected the type specimens of a few birds such as White-browed Robin *Poecilodryas superciliosa*, but was too much preoccupied with herding bullocks and finding water to do much collecting. His sad death on the Cape York Peninsula in June 1845, aged just 33, robbed England and Australia of one of the most able bird collectors, but left us with a plethora of irreplaceable specimens and field notes. Clem has still much work to do, but due to a two-year grant from the Leverhulme Trust has been able to answer many thorny problems, and has posted the results of her research on National Museums Liverpool's website, see: www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/collections/zoology/john-gilbert/index.aspx