

LETTER

The editor,
Sir,

The place of collection of the original specimens of *Pealeornis maoriana* Mathews, 1932

Thank you for making available to me a pre-publication copy of the short note by Drs. Bourne and Jouanin about the origin of the specimens of the New Zealand storm petrel which appears in this issue of *Notornis*.

Mathews originally described *Pealeornis maoriana* from "Banks Peninsula, New Zealand" in the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 52 (1932) at p.132. He designated British Museum specimen no. 1895.2.1.11, presented by "G.C.Steel", as the type. Mathews indicated he had examined 3 specimens of *Pealeornis maoriana*, but he specifically mentioned only the type specimen which is still in The Natural History Museum, London.

The specimen designated by Mathews as the type of *Pealeornis maoriana* was among a collection of 18 birds, including 16 from New Zealand, which the relevant register entry shows was presented to the British Museum by one "G. Carrick Steet Esq 130 King Henry's Road, N.W." in 1895. Nothing more is known about Steet, and it is not known by whom or when any of the specimens that he presented to the British Museum, registered as 1895.2.1, 1-18, had been collected.

No.1895.2.1.11, the holotype of *Pealeornis maoriana*, is the only unnamed specimen in the register entry, but its locality is given as "Off Banks Peninsula, New Zealand". The other 15 New Zealand specimens are described in the register entry as 1895.2.1.3 - "*Clitonix albicillus*" (= *Mohoua albicilla*) "Gt Barrier Is"; 1895.2.1.4 & 5 - "*Nestor meridionalis*. Gt Barrier Is"; 1895.2.1.6 - "*Ardeiralla sacra*" (= *Egretta sacra*) "River Awanui" (probably the Awanui River which flows into Rangaunu Harbour); 1895.2.1.7 & 8 - "*Botaurus poecilopterus*" (= *Botaurus poeciloptilus*) "River Awanui"; 1895.2.1.9 - "*Phalacrocorax varius*. Kawaw, Auckland Dist" (no doubt Kawau Island). This specimen is illustrated in Charles Fleming's *George Edward Lodge. The unpublished New Zealand bird paintings* (1982), Pl. 24; 1895.2.1.10 - "*Daption capense*. Off Port Lyttleton"; 1895.2.1.12, 13 & 14 - "*Halcyon vagans*" (= *Halcyon sancta vagans*) "Gt Barrier Is"; 1895.2.1.15 - "*Aegialitis obscurus*" (= *Charadrius obscurus*) "River Awanui"; 1895.2.1.16 - "*Porphyrio melanotus*"

(= *Porphyrio porphyrio melanotus*) "River Awanui"; 1895.2.1.17 & 18 - "*Eudiptula minor*. Kawaw, Auckland Dist".

There is no reason to doubt the validity of the localities, which presumably are the places of collection, given for the New Zealand specimens named in the register entry. It would have been possible in the 19th century to collect those species at the localities given for them, including cape pigeons "Off Port Lyttleton". Therefore, there is no reason to doubt the validity of the locality "Off Banks Peninsula" given for the storm petrel registered under No.1895.2.1.11. Accordingly, in the absence of any better evidence, the type locality of *Pealeornis maoriana* Mathews, 1932 must be accepted as "Off Banks Peninsula, New Zealand".

Light squalls followed by calm intervals throughout 8 February 1827 kept the French exploring ship *Astrolabe*, under the command of Dumont d'Urville, "about ten or twelve miles" to the north of East Cape of the North Island of New Zealand. Under that date, d'Urville recorded what appears to be the only reference to storm petrels seen while the *Astrolabe* was in New Zealand waters during this visit (from O. Wright. *New Zealand 1826-1827. From the French of Dumont d'Urville* (Wellington 1950) at p.129. The original French narrative is in d'Urville's *Voyage de la Corvette l'Astrolabe 1826-1827-1828-1829, Histoire du Voyage* Vol. 2 (Paris 1830) at p. 118):

"The sailmaker killed a light-brown-headed gannet and two kingfishers; a boat was let down to pick them up. Ever since we had been near East Cape, gannets had fluttered the whole time round the corvette, and this morning, in spite of the fine weather, a crowd of stormy petrels appeared in our wake, although we had not seen a single one in the preceding days. We smiled and wondered whether, in a region so far away from Europe, these birds, appearing in this way, would justify the vulgar idea common among sailors".

A large collection of mammals and birds from the *Astrolabe* expedition was presented by Quoy and Gaimard, the naturalists on board, to the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris in May 1829, the month following the return of the ship to France. Two storm petrels were included in this collection. They appear in the *Catalogue des Mammiferes et des Oiseaux rapportes par MM. Quoy et Gaimard, medecins et naturalistes de l'expedition de l'Astrolabe* dated 25 May 1829 as "254. Le Petrel fregate, P. fregata. 2. Nlle

Zelande". It was these two specimens, identified later as *Pealeornis maoriana*, that Bonaparte described under *Thalassidroma fregata* in his *Conspectus Generum Avium* Vol. 2 (1857) at p. 200. Bonaparte stated that they were "ex N. Zelandiae Promontorio orientali". There is no reason to doubt the validity of this provenance.

Therefore, the evidence clearly indicates that the two Paris specimens of *Pealeornis maoriana* were taken by the *Astrolabe* expedition off East Cape of the North Island of New Zealand, probably on 8 February 1827. Mathews was patently incorrect when he said in his *Supplement to the birds of Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands* (1936) at p. 79 that the *Promontorio orientali* given by Bonaparte as the locality of the *Astrolabe* specimens "undoubtedly means Banks Peninsula and not East Cape". It would appear that Mathews did not have any justification for this opinion, other than that he considered his type specimen in the British Museum came from Banks Peninsula. Unfortunately,

Mathews' opinion has been followed faithfully by subsequent authors including such eminent authorities as Murphy & Snyder in *American Museum Novitates* No. 1596 (1952), and Oliver in his *Birds of New Zealand* (1955) at p.100. The instant case provides a classic example of how an error repeated by subsequent authorities can eventually become accepted as established fact.

I thank Michael Walters of The Natural History Museum, London and Christian Jouanin of the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris who, as long ago as 1990, generously provided me with photocopies of pertinent entries in records in the possession of their respective museums, accompanied by helpful comments.

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