

SIGHT RECORDS OF GREY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ELUCIDATION

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ABSTRACT

Sight records of the Grey Heron allegedly seen in New Zealand in 1947 and 1951 and recorded in the Classified Notes of the OSNZ are shown to be attributable to a youthful confusion with the White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*) then less common than now. The background of this cautionary tale is given, resulting in the specimen of the Grey Heron in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History documented by Parkes (1974) representing the only genuine evidence of the occurrence of this species within the New Zealand Region.

Following W. R. B. Oliver's opinions expressed in his review of the first OSNZ checklist, some comments are made on the advisability of any checklist committee supporting its decisions on taxonomic or distributional changes by more detailed publications of its reasons. It is not considered sufficient to merge taxa or discard dubious records without documentation.

The currently appearing paper by Parkes (*Notornis*, this issue) gives a most welcome investigation of the status of the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) in New Zealand, especially to me since I am responsible for the perpetration of the error of two sight records of this species which have found their way into and, hopefully, out of the literature of New Zealand birds. For many years I have had my explanation lying in my bottom drawer but, for a variety of reasons, the time has only now come when I am able to expiate myself.

Towards the end of 1947, Dr Robert Cushman Murphy arrived in New Zealand to prepare for an expedition to the Snares Islands to obtain material for displays at the American Museum of Natural History. Amongst the places he wished to visit in New Zealand was the famous Pyramid Valley moa swamp in North Canterbury, some 50 miles north of Christchurch and arrangements were made to take him there following his return from the Snares early in December. As a schoolboy protege of Dr R. A. Falla, then Director of the Canterbury Museum, I was particularly privileged to be included in the party, led by Dr Falla, which took Dr & Mrs Murphy to Pyramid Valley on 23 December 1947. Other members of this party included Professor R. S. Allen and Professor E. Percival who were to be my teachers at university and from whom I learned that accurate observation and adequate documentation were paramount in all things.

On the journey north we stopped at several places to show off the local birds and features of interest and one such stop was at the

main road bridge over the Ashley River. Here, some distance upstream, we saw a greyish-plumaged heron, which I now assume to have been a White-faced Heron, which took Dr Murphy's attention with the remark — "That's what I would call a Grey Heron if this was Europe." With youthful enthusiasm and perhaps not appreciating the full significance of Dr Murphy's comment in relation to the relative rarity at that time of the White-faced Heron, I duly recorded it in my notes of the day as a Grey Heron. I was not then a member of the Ornithological Society but when, on joining in 1948, I sent in my first bundle of contributions for the "Classified Summarised Notes" I included this observation as — "GREY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*). — One seen from Ashley River Bridge, 23/12/47; first seen and identified by Dr. R. C. Murphy. (E.W.D.)." and the compiler of the Notes remarked: "Notable records include those of grey heron in the South Island . . ." Who would doubt an identification attributed to a world authority? Not having been brought to task, I recorded in the 1951 issue of the Notes — "GREY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*). — Bird seen, Ashley River Bridge, closely resembling that seen on 23/12/47 (N.Z.B.N., Jan., 1949, p. 91); 29/10/49. — (E.W.D.)." Both of these records were accepted, without question, as sight records in the first edition of the *Checklist of New Zealand Birds* issued by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ 1953).

In the intervening years no question was raised as to the correctness of these identifications, especially considering the possibility that there had been confusion with the White-faced Heron which was quickly becoming a widely distributed and better known species. Perhaps I had sealed their authenticity with my unwarranted attribution to Dr Murphy. However, in the next edition of the checklist, the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand* (OSNZ 1970), both of these records were relegated, as Parkes has already stated, to the "Suspense List." Now, with the establishment of a Rare Birds Committee by the Ornithological Society of N.Z., such alleged sight records doubtless would have been thoroughly examined before being committed to print. Nevertheless, the relegation, without reason, by the compilers of the 1970 list of two already published, and presumably accepted, records may be misleading in itself. The subsequent reader may wonder what the status of the 1947 and 1949 Ashley River records really is. Were they misidentifications of something else? If so, what? Or did the Checklist Committee have further information which enabled them to judge the situation? The greatest weakness of such checklists is, in fact, that this sort of decision has to be made. Oliver (1954) has already drawn attention to the difficulties encountered by checklist committees in trying to arrive at taxonomic or in assessing changes in classification or status. It is worth recalling his words: "A committee set up to compile a checklist should be concerned mainly with nomenclature, that is deciding the validity of names and questions of priority. If the committee finds during its discussions that changes in classification or status are desirable, it should make them only if it gives reasons

for so doing and quotes original references . . ." (Oliver 1954: 190). The same philosophy holds good for the accepting or rejecting of previously published records, whether adequately documented or not. The *Annotated Checklist* continues the practices deplored by Oliver. For example, two alleged species may be merged (such as the subfossil eagles *Harpagornis assimilis* and *H. moorei* thought to represent sexual dimorphism of one species, but never documented or analysed to show it). The only sensible procedure for the compilers of such lists (unless they are expressly stated to represent the *status quo*, i.e. the names or decisions acceptable to the majority of practising ornithologists) is to make them truly "annotated" and give the reasons for changes in names of status indicating clearly which have been decided from published analyses (with references to the appropriate literature) and which by a committee opinion or vote as Oliver (1954: 191) said was done in the 1953 list. One special danger is that if forms are merged, polytypic species created, or their status decided upon categorically in such a way, further investigation of the truth may be stifled by the power of the printed word.

Parkes (1974) has now shown that the Grey Heron has its place in the New Zealand avifauna and can, therefore, be removed from the "Suspense List" under category "(a)" i.e. "old records . . . no longer verifiable . . . because specimens said to have been obtained are no longer traceable." However, the more recent sight records of herons seen at the Ashley River in 1947 and 1949 are now acknowledged by their perpetrator as belonging to category "(b)" i.e. "... unsupported by adequate evidence . . ." The White-faced Heron has now become, as is well known, a common bird in contrast with the rarity of the 1940s, and the recorder of the Ashley birds knows it rather better now than he did then.

The Pyramid Valley excursion had a sequel which is not irrelevant to the present discussion.

Early in the next year (i.e. 1948) I had to write the usual schoolboy essay on what I had done in the holidays, a task well known to all of us. I gave my impressions of that trip in the exalted company of several distinguished scientists, impressing my form master, the late Mr James Earl, sufficiently for him to persuade me to offer the essay to the school magazine which accepted it, thus making my first literary effort (Dawson 1948). Later, about the time of the Seventh Pacific Science Congress, when newspapers were eagerly reporting events of science, I was admonished by the leader of our expedition who said he was "surprised" that I should have given an interview about our Pyramid Valley experiences without first seeking his permission. I was mystified and protested, I believe in vain, my innocence. Subsequently I found that an article had appeared in an Auckland paper, *The New Zealand Observer*, in which the writer, a Mr Stuart Gregory, had interviewed a Mr E. W. Dawson, one of a party arranged to visit the Pyramid Valley moa swamp "to allow

Dr. Murphy to obtain first-hand information about the occurrence and excavation of the remains of the gigantic extinct New Zealand bird," an event which, according to Mr Gregory, erroneously led to Dr Murphy's inclusion by the National Geographic Society in a list of the most important exploration feats of the year.

The apparent interview contained phrases and descriptions just as they had appeared in my magazine article and it was evident that a journalist had had his copy provided for him from this source. Disturbed, as only the young might be, I wrote to the editor of the *Observer* to find out how Mr Gregory had obtained this interview without me being present. He replied that one couldn't expect a busy journalist like Mr Gregory to keep notes of everyone he had interviewed. I let the matter drop but I think I had made a reputation as an unauthorised seeker of fame. There is a lesson to be learned that not only are one's first literary efforts published in obscure places likely to be plagiarised (flattering though this may be) but that interviews are not always what they seem.

Recently I discussed with Mr Eric Blomfield, former Secretary to the company which published the *Observer*, the mystery about the activities of Stuart Gregory whose address or whereabouts I could never find, and I am most grateful for his help. It appears, from Mr Blomfield's recollections, that "Stuart Gregory" was, in fact, the pen-name of a writer prominent in the world of politics (but who had been editor of the *Observer* at the time of my inquiries) who wished to continue under a cloak of pseudonymity and whose identity I must still not reveal in deference to Mr Blomfield's wishes. Hence, the interview could not have taken place and although the 1947 record of the Grey Heron is perpetuated not only in the school magazine article but also by Mr Gregory, that is the end of it.

I have now exculpated myself as an unreliable member of an expedition on the counts of unintentional but irresponsible reporting of a phenomenon which did not exist and of the charge that I gave an unauthorised interview to a man who, as it happens, similarly did not exist. There is a moral somewhere in this cautionary tale.

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CORRIGENDUM

In the paper by D. J. & C. J. Horning "Bird records of the 1971-1973 Snares Islands, New Zealand, Expedition," *Notornis* 21 (1): 13-24, March 1974, there is an error on page 18 under 'Sooty Shearwater' — For "... on 17 May ..." read "... on 1 May ..." As the authors point out, the date is important.



NOTICE

SUMMER SCHOOL OF ORNITHOLOGY

Preliminary notice is given that this will be held in Nelson from 18 to 25 January next. The School will be fully residential, with everything found — beds, bedding, food, and someone to prepare and cook it. A comprehensive course of lectures has been planned and two field days will be included, one in the bush and one on an estuary.

The cost will be between \$35 and \$40 for full residential tariff. The usual notice and enrolment form will be sent out with September "Notornis."