

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

18 March 2021

The Editor
Notornis

Sir

Kirwan & Collar's (2020) intensively researched and most detailed paper on the conundrum that is *Thinornis rossii* is a timely reminder that there is much we still do not understand about the former diversity and relationships of the New Zealand avifauna. Knowing what was here is the only true measure of the diversity lost over the past 1,000 years. Kirwan & Collar's paper is not the first time that the general conclusion, followed in successive checklists, that the Auckland Islands specimen was either of an immature straggler from the former mainland populations of *T. novaeseelandiae*, or had simply been mislabelled, has been questioned.

Nearly 20 years ago, we briefly canvassed the issue in our general survey of the pre-human New Zealand avifauna (Holdaway *et al.* 2001). Given the context of that paper, we explored the issue much less fully, so I am grateful that the authors have now provided a comprehensive survey. We did suggest, however, that the then recent advances in ancient genetics might be a way of settling the specimen's – and potentially the taxon's – status. I therefore applaud Kirwan and Collar's renewed call for a genetic study to explore the taxonomic status of the presently enigmatic holotype specimen, 1842.12.16.78 in the Natural History Museum, UK, which was collected by a member of Sir James Clark Ross's expedition.

I hope that one of the ancient genetics laboratories can heed Kirwan & Collar's (2020) new request for a genetic study. Such a study could fruitfully include an exploration of the status and relationships of the extinct mainland population and the surviving Chatham Island population presently included in the same taxon, *T. novaeseelandiae*.

A brief search of the Web revealed the presence at AMNH of a skin, AMNH 737849, of a male from

the "Otago Coast" acquired in a Walter Buller collection. Skins from the Chatham population are also available there, some collected by Palmer in 1890 and others 36 years later by Rollo Beck and his colleagues of the Whitney South Sea Expedition. Dannefaerd's specimens, taken in the Chathams on 13 March 1896, and other Chatham birds are in the South Australian Museum and Museum of Victoria.

In view of the differences between mainland and Chatham Island populations of other genera, it cannot be assumed that such a site faithful bird had not diverged in isolation. The study would be an opportunity, too, of an exploration of the relationships and status of the genus *Thinornis* itself. The hooded dotterel, the potential Australian sister species, was moved to *Thinornis* by Christian *et al.* (1992) and is now variously known as *Thinornis rubricollis*, *T. cucullatus*, and still by some as *Charadrius rubricollis*.

Yours, etc.

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