

**More Laishleyana:  
Red Wattlebird and White-faced Heron**

Most of the 50 or so native birds, including some albatrosses and petrels, which Richard Laishley painted during the first eight years after he settled at Onehunga in 1860 were the common species such as a well-schooled naturalist could expect to find locally or on excursions which he made to Nelson and the Bay of Islands. The omission of two species, Piopio and Pied Stilt, is noteworthy and may support Buller's judgement that by the middle of the century *Turnagra tanagra* was already very rare north of the Waikato and that *Himantopus leucocephalus* had not yet reached the vicinity of Auckland.

Notes on two unexpected rarities, Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*) and Blue Petrel (*Halobaena caerulea*), have already been published in *Notornis* 26: 120 and 30: 166-167. Their faithful recording by an expert naturalist of the mid-19th century came as something of a surprise. But still more shocks await the researcher among Laishley's diaries and sketchbooks. Some of these I now propose to discuss.

The fourth bird plate in the folder (Figure 1) depicts two birds of somewhat similar size and proportions, Long-tailed Cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*) and Red Wattlebird (*Anthochaera carunculata*). There can be little doubt that Laishley handled the distinctive Australian honeyeater which is said to have turned up at Matakana, north of Auckland, just in time to gain mention under the name of *Mimus carunculatus* in 1865 in Buller's prize-winning Essay on the Ornithology of New Zealand. Buller assigned the bird to the Turdidae, and Laishley called it a Northern Thrush. It was a stranger to him and he may have thought he was painting a Piopio. Some years later in his Gleanings, Laishley wrote: "This is a species which we have never seen alive nor have we met with those who have observed it in its natural haunts. The description which follows is given from a well preserved specimen in the Auckland Museum, where it is marked 'Thrush Matakana' ". The specimen is no longer to be found in the collection at the Auckland Museum.

Several questions naturally arise. How did this common southern Australian honeyeater, which is not a markedly migratory species, reach Matakana? Had it flown the Tasman under its own power or had it come aboard a ship along the Australian coast, had an assisted passage and then been fraudulently passed off as a genuine straggler to New Zealand? In the 19th century the little anchorages of the east coast north of Auckland were much used by sailing ships.

The long synonymy given by Buller (1888, 2nd edition p.106) bears witness to the problem presented to the early taxonomists by this large long-tailed honeyeater. For many years after Latham had called it Watted Bee-eater, it had been placed in *Merops*. Then, according to the whims of subsequent systematists, it flitted in and out of various genera, *Corvus*, *Creadion*, *Mimus*, of which the last is now the generic name of the American mockingbirds. Eventually, with other big Australian honeyeaters, it became

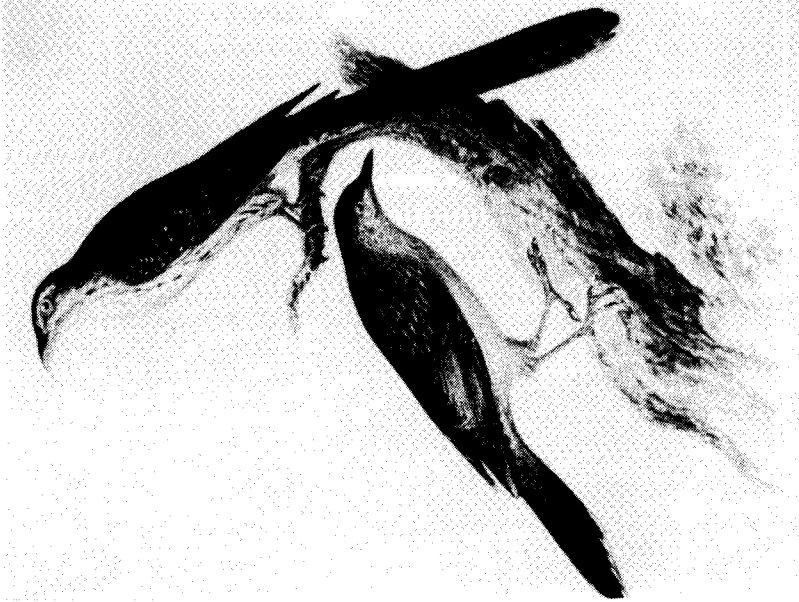
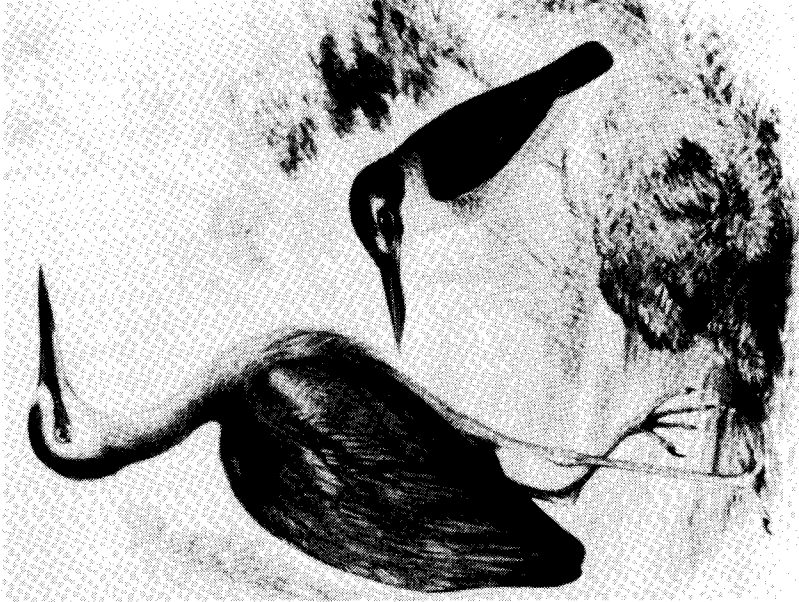


FIGURE 1

stabilised as *Anthochaera*; and there it abides. The meaning seems to be something like 'Joyful greeter of flowers'.

When we examine Laishley's painting closely, we notice not only the shape and the feathering, but also how carefully he reproduced the small red wattles and the pale yellow wash on the belly. The identity of Laishley's so-called Northern Thrush is beyond question. We would like to know the truth behind its arrival in New Zealand.

A painting dated August 1865 depicts a Kingfisher (*Halcyon sancta*) and a heron which is clearly not a Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*) but a White-faced Heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*), which rather revealingly Laishley calls *Ardea leucops*, using the name given by Wagler in his *Systema Avium* of 1827. As was his wont, Laishley was quick off the mark. He was also aware that the White-faced Heron was at that time a very rare bird in New Zealand; and he adds a note "Shot in Manukau. Regarded by the person who forwarded it to me and who had been long a resident, as uncommon." This seems to be by far the earliest record of this species as far north in New Zealand as Auckland; and indeed, there are few, if any, earlier recorded occurrences elsewhere in the whole country. Buller does not mention White-faced Heron in his 1865 Essay.

Formerly the typical heron of the rocky bays and basaltic reefs of the cone-ringed Mangere Inlet was *sacra*. Then in the late 1940s a few White-faced Heron began to appear. Their subsequent increase was dramatic. In 1960, when winter and summer censuses of shore birds covered most of Manukau Harbour, the counts of White-faced Heron were respectively 42 and 40. Ten years later in 1970, the respective figures were 362 and 418. Meanwhile Reef Herons had virtually disappeared from the upper reaches of the harbour, although a few persisted on the Awhitu Peninsula and towards the seaward end.

Laishley's painting of a White-faced Heron must predate by several years that of J. G. Keulemans which appeared in Buller's first edition of 1873.

I thank the British Museum (Natural History) and the Alexander Turnbull Library for letting me have 35 mm colour slides of the bird paintings which I have here discussed.

#### REFERENCE

SIBSON, R. B. 1983. Richard Laishley. Priest, painter naturalist. *Notornis* 30: 29-33.

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#### An Arctic Skua taking passerines at sea

On 27 April 1986, about 3 km to sea east of Wollongong, Australia (34°25'S, 150°57'E), I watched an adult dark phase Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) pursue a Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*). The two birds passed about 10 m above the boat, heading west. After about 5 min I saw the same skua chasing another passerine, about 1-2 m above the water. The skua forced the passerine, possibly a *Petroica* sp. (M. Carter, pers. comm.) into the water, and itself landed, but I could not see whether it ate the bird.