

A One-time Mecca for Ornithologists

When one contemplates the almost Manhattan-like skyline and interminable urban sprawl of modern Durban, coupled with its complex of satellite towns, it is difficult to believe that just over a hundred years ago the incredibly rich wildlife then present in and around the Bay of Port Natal, round which Durban has since developed, should have aroused the worldwide interest of naturalists, and enticed not only the botanists recorded in the recent interesting article by Professor A. W. Bayer in *Natalia*, No. 4, but various workers dedicated largely to the study of birds.

Before the advent of European settlement, the Bay of Port Natal and the surrounding country was a wildlife paradise *par excellence*. Owing to the area's diverse range of widely disparate habitats, it supported, within a relatively compressed and limited compass, a particularly rich and varied fauna, possessing many exciting terminal tropical elements. Apart from the ocean and its shoreline and the tidal mudflats and mangrove swamps in the Bay, one had a veritable mosaic of interdigitating habitats, comprising small freshwater vleis, rivers and fringing marshlands and meadows, coastal scrub bush and lowland evergreen forest, this latter of considerable extent, covering the entire range of low hills lying behind present-day Durban, and known as the Berea. The forest on the Berea supported at that time large herds of elephants, the fine ivory from which was one of the primary reasons for the Bay of Port Natal being a port of call for passing ships long before the annexation of the district by Britain.

It is difficult to pinpoint the first collector of bird specimens in and around Port Natal, but this much is certain: even prior to 1830 skins of birds collected in these parts were finding their way back to the cabinets of students of ornithology in England. N. A. Vigors (1785-1840), at a meeting of the Zoological Society of London held on the 14th of June, 1831, exhibited a collection of birds presented to the Society by a certain Henry Ellis, Esq., of Portland Place, London, all believed to have emanated from Algoa Bay and the immediate hinterland of what is today the eastern Cape. Among the nine new species from this collection described by Vigors at the meeting were the Purplecrested Turaco *Tauraco porphyreolophus* and the Spotted Thrush *Zoothera guttata*. As this turaco or lourie does not occur anywhere near Algoa Bay and ranges no further south than the Umtamvuna River on the Transkei-Natal border in the south-east of Africa, and the thrush no further south than the coast of the Transkei, it seems clear that some of the birds in Ellis's collection presented to the Zoological Society of London came, in the first instance, from Natal, and almost certainly Port Natal. We know that early settlers in Natal and elsewhere frequently augmented their meagre incomes by collecting and preparing specimens of local birds and other items of natural history, selling these, often through the agency of crew members from visiting ships, to various wealthy European collectors, who, at that time, were busy vying with one another in describing so-called novelties to the nascent science of ornithology from remote corners of the earth.

The first collector and student to investigate first-hand the birdlife of coastal Natal, and of whom we have precise information, was Dr. Andrew Smith (1797-1872), who arrived at the Bay of Port Natal in early 1832, while on a political mission on behalf of the British Government to the court of the Zulu king, Dingane. Despite the burden of duties accruing from the main purpose of his mission to Zululand, Smith found time to collect birds as well as specimens of other animal groups of moment to him. I have not endeavoured to ascertain all the birds which Smith ultimately described as new to science in the pages of the *South African Quarterly Journal* and later in his monumental work, *Illustrations of the Zoology of South Africa*, which was published in England long after he had left these shores, but would mention, among others, the Natal Francolin *Francolinus natalensis*, the Mangrove Kingfisher *Halcyon senegaloides*, the Natal Robin *Cossypha natalensis* and the Olive Sunbird *Nectarinia olivacea*, all of which were originally described by Smith on the basis of the specimens collected at Durban. While crossing the Tugela river into Zululand on his way to Dingane's court, he obtained the type specimen of the southern race of the Wattled Plover *Vanellus senegallus (V.s.lateralis)*, and in Zululand the original specimens of the African Broadbill *Smithornis capensis*, the generic name of which latter species was proposed in his honour in 1850 by the eminent French ornithologist, Prince Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803-1857).

Smith's discoveries at Port Natal, coupled with the many others he made during the course of his 'Expedition for Exploring Central Africa from the Cape of Good Hope', 1834, aroused the interest and wonder of workers in western Europe, and just a few years later the Port Natal area was again to be visited by naturalists bent on making discoveries of lasting moment.

On the 11th of June, 1839, there arrived at Port Natal aboard the schooner *Mazeppa* one of the most intrepid and hard working naturalists to visit the soil of South Africa. This was the Swede Johan August Wahlberg (1810-1856). On board the same ship he met the French traveller, Adulphe Delegorgue (1814-1850) and the German botanist, Dr. F. C. C. Krauss (1802-1890), both of whom were to become companions or associates in the early stages of his work in South Africa.

While Wahlberg was camped in a reed hut near the Boer settlement at Congella, Delegorgue was his next-door neighbour. Delegorgue is remembered because of his collecting in the Berea forest of the type specimen of the fine pigeon which now bears his name, *Columba delegorguei*, described by an anonymous author in an appendix to Delegorgue's account of his travels in southern Africa and published in the year 1847. Delegorgue is also remembered in the annals of South African ornithology because of his discovery of the Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei* in the Transvaal, and also named in 1847.

Already in Natal at this time was that somewhat obscure character, Wilhelm Gueinzus, who was essentially an amateur botanist, but also dabbled in entomology, herpetology and ornithology, and made a living from the sale of specimens to German centres. He arrived from Europe in 1835 and was still active in the 1870s. It was almost certainly Gueinzus who was instrumental in the production of the original specimen(s) of what we know today as the Fasciated Snake Eagle *Circaetus fasciolatus* Kaup, 1850, based on the earlier nude name (*nomen nudum*) of Gray, 1848, and the type-locality of which is

Durban. Gueinzus resided in Stella Bush on the Berea for a time and later settled at what is now New Germany, where he lived the life of a hermit. Professor Bayer has given some interesting glimpses into the lifestyle of this strange eccentric in his paper on Natal botanists. It would seem from a paper by Dr. Ernst Schüz (1964) that the botanist, Ferdinand Krauss, also collected birds quite extensively, and was apparently the first person to shoot the Gorgeous Bush Shrike *Telophorus quadricolor*, described in 1851 by John Cassin of Philadelphia, presumably from other material. The birdskins Krauss collected went to the Stuttgart Natural History Museum in Germany, according to Schüz, and have seldom been alluded to in the literature on African birds, for the simple reason that the collection was never studied collectively and reported on by a major ornithological worker.

Count Nils Gyldenstolpe (1934), in his account of Wahlberg's collecting activities in southern Africa, tells us that from his base near Port Natal he collected as far down the South Coast as Umzinto, and to the north of present day Durban he got as far as the Tugela river. His sojourn on the coast of Natal was broken in early October, 1841, when he trekked in the company of a young Boer, Willem Nel, to the Orange Free State and the southern and western parts of what is now the Transvaal, where he made most of his meritorious discoveries. He returned to Port Natal in November, 1842, having nearly starved to death on the banks of the upper Tugela, which he was not able to cross because of flooding. After further collecting activity in the Natal lowlands he again left for the far hinterland in June, 1843, where he was engaged for over a year, returning to the Natal coast in mid-November, 1844. Wahlberg's extensive collections were shipped back to Sweden, and the birds new to science were described by Professor C. J. Sundevall (1801-1875) in 1850. Wahlberg financed much of his exploration by hunting ivory, and during the course of a second visit to Africa he perished under the feet of a maddened elephant he had wounded on the 6th of March, 1856, in the Mababe Flats sector of northern Botswana. Among the Natal birds made known to science on the basis of Wahlberg's collecting were the barbets *Pogoniulus bilineatus* and *Stactolaema leucotis*, the Greyrumped Swallow *Pseudhirundo griseopyga*, the Brown Robin *Erythropygia signata*, the Wattle-eyed Flycatcher *Platysteira peltata*, the Short-tailed Pipit *Anthus brachyurus*, and the White-eye of these parts *Zosterops pallidus virens*. Sundevall has fixed the type-localities of some of these birds as the Umlalazi river, Zululand, but it is doubtful if Wahlberg at any stage penetrated as far north into Zululand, and the birds concerned almost certainly came from along the banks of the somewhat similarly named Umlazi river, near Durban.

In the 1840s and early 1850s five or so further African species of birds were proposed by specialists, the types in all instances from Durban. The beautiful Pinkthroated Longclaw *Macronyx ameliae* and the Indigobird *Vidua funerea* were described in 1845 and 1847, respectively, by the French nobleman, the Marquis Leone de Tarragon (1813-1896), the longclaw being named by him in honour of his wife. Two other species are the Gorgeous Bush Shrike *Telophorus quadricolor* and the Whitewinged Widowbird *Euplectes albonotatus*, named in 1851 and 1848 by John Cassin (1813-1869) of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, and the first American ornithologist to work on the birds of the Ethiopian Region. The specimens from Durban (Port Natal) upon which these taxa were based probably reached both de Tarragon and Cassin through

the agency of Maison Verreaux. Cassin may have got his two novelties as a result of the purchase of Prince Massena's (the Duc de Rivoli's) collection of birds by the Academy in 1846. In this same year the Baron N. F. A. A. de Lafresnaye (1783-1861), an eminent French ornithologist of the period, described the southern form of the Cuckoo Falcon *Aviceda cuculoides verreauxi*, again from Durban. The actual collectors of the longclaw and other birds just mentioned are unknown, but it is certain that the Verreaux brothers, Jules and Edouard, who were active as taxidermists and collectors in southern Africa between the 1820s and 1830s and later established the business house, Maison Verreaux, in Paris, and whose younger brother, Alexis, lived and died in Durban, were involved. The French connection in all instances and the dedicatory name given to the falcon seem to clinch the matter.

The next personality to figure in the annals of ornithological exploration of the country in and around the present city of Durban was probably the last to unearth novelties at the species level in these parts. Thomas H. Ayres (c. 1827-1913) arrived with his parents and other members of the family at Port Natal in 1850, leaving two years later along with some other settlers for Australia, only to return later and farm in what is now the Pinetown district, just inland of Durban. Ayres was one of those colonists referred to earlier who augmented their incomes from other sources by collecting and preparing items of natural history, selling them to ardent and often monied students of such disciplines in western Europe. Most of the novelties described from birds shot by Ayres were named by Dr. K. J. G. Hartlaub (1814-1900) of Bremen, Germany. Some of the species named by Hartlaub on Ayres's specimens taken near Port Natal or just while noting that Ayres shot the type of that elusive forest-dwelling thrush *Muscicapa (Alseonax) caerulescens* and the Green Twinspot *Mandingoa nitidula*. While extra-limital in so far as this article is concerned, it is worthwhile noting that Ayres shot the type of that elusive forest-dwelling thrush *Turdus (Zoothera) gurneyi* in Town Bush, Pietermaritzburg, and was also instrumental in obtaining the type of Gurney's Sugarbird *Promerops gurneyi*, described by Jules Verreaux in 1871, somewhere in Natal. While Ayres's main patron was John Henry Gurney, snr. (1819-1890), of Norwich, England, who relied on Hartlaub's taxonomic judgment, he disposed of his material to others, including R. Bowdler Sharpe of the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), in South Kensington, London. In 1865 Ayres moved to the Transvaal, where he farmed, panned for gold, brewed, and collected birds for sale, settling down at Potchefstroom, where he ultimately died. His bird discoveries in the Transvaal need not concern us here, but novelties such as the Slaty Egret *Egretta vinaceigula* and the Whitewinged Crake *Sarothrura ayresi* stem from this latter stage of his activities.

When Ayres left the coastal region of Natal for the hinterland in 1865 the descriptive phase in the ornithological history of the Durban district was over and no forms at the species level were left to be described by later workers. Taxa at the subspecies level, of course, are still described from coastal Natal from time to time, and new species to the local list continue to be recorded from among the innumerable seashore- and wading-birds visiting these parts on migration.

Also worthy of mention, if only in passing, are two bird collecting contemporaries of Ayres, one of whom figures in a minor way in the annals of Natal ornithology. Mark J. McKen, an early Curator of the Botanic Gardens in



Upper left: The Rev. R. B. Woodward.

Upper right: The Rev. J. D. S. Woodward. The authors of *Natal Birds*, published in 1899, the first South African regional list of birds.

Lower: Dr. K. J. G. Hartlaub, of Bremen, Germany, the well-known systematist of the second half of last century, who described the last full species of birds to be discovered in and around the present city of Durban on the basis of specimens collected by Thomas Ayres.



Two species of non-passerine birds first made known to science on the basis of specimens collected at Port Natal in 1832 by Dr. Andrew Smith.

Upper figure: Buffspotted Flufftail Sarothrura elegans.

Lower figure: Natal Nightjar Caprimulgus natalensis.



Johan August Wahlberg (1810-1856), who started his southern African collecting activities at Port Natal in 1839.

Durban, collected quite extensively, presumably as a commercial venture, much of his material now reposing in the Zoological Museum of Cambridge University, in England. Professor Bayer informs us that McKen arrived in Durban in 1850. Nothing new or of moment resulted from McKen's digression into the field of ornithological collecting, however. The second collector to be mentioned here is Henry Gordge (1829-1907), who was by trade a boat-builder on the shore of the Bay of Port Natal. He was also a farmer and thatcher, and a spare time collector of birds for the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), London. Gordge is remembered largely because of his obtaining the only specimen of the Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus*, a migrant from Asia, ever to be obtained in Natal.

The first eminent European ornithologist to visit the Bay of Port Natal for the purpose of studying and obtaining specimens first-hand appears to have been Henry Seebohm (1832-1895), who came to Durban to study Palaearctic migrants, particularly waders, in 1886. Seebohm was, by calling, an ironmaster and one of the founders of Barclay's Bank. A giant of Victorian ornithology, he wrote a monumental work on the wading birds of the world, still widely used to this day.

Towards the close of the century and resulting from the British military build-up in South Africa, various British officers with a penchant for ornithology visited Durban and district. None is on record as having made any ornithological find of lasting moment near the Bay, though some did so in the far interior of the province of Natal. Captain G. E. Shelley (1840-1910), a nephew of the poet, gave his name to the well-known Shelley's Francolin *Francolinus shelleyi*. He was the author of the *Birds of Africa*, which was left uncompleted on his death, and was certainly the most eminent of the British military bird workers alluded to. Others were W. H. Fielden (1838-1921) and P. S. G. Reid (1845-1902), the last-named officer giving his name to the upper Natal and adjacent regions' race of the Cape Bunting, *Emberiza capensis reidi*, named by Shelley in the *Birds of Africa* in 1902.

In the last decades of the century there appeared on the scene that indefatigable and rather obscure pair, the brothers Rev. R. B. and Rev. J. D. S. Woodward, about whom so little still seems to be on record. Originally missionaries attached to St. Luke's, Harding, and later Adam's Mission Station, Amanzimtoti, they made two epic collecting trips to Zululand, discovering the localised relict barbet *Stactolaema olivacea woodwardi* and the flycatcher *Batis fratrum*. In so far as Durban district is concerned, their claim to an honorable mention is that they collected, in the forest then still covering much of the Berea, the type specimen of the eastern race of the Palaearctic Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin woodwardi*, named in their honour, in 1877. This novelty was named originally in the belief that the single specimen represented an indigenous species, but in recent times it has been shown to be applicable to the eastern populations of the Garden Warbler, a species which breeds wholly in western and west-central Eurasia. In 1899, during the Anglo-Boer War, the Woodward brothers published their small book *Natal Birds*, which is now a collector's item and much sought after. While containing much information on the status of certain birds in Natal at the close of last century, the vernacular and scientific nomenclature employed makes interpretation frequently difficult. In so far as South African ornithology is concerned, the work is mainly an object of historical significance, as it was the first regional or provincial list for the present Republic of South Africa.

At the turn of the century two other brothers deeply interested in birds emerged from among the growing European community resident in and around Durban Bay as the Bay of Port Natal had come to be known. The brothers A. D. Millar (1858-1911) and H. M. Millar (1865-1962) collected extensively in the district, the former devoting his energies to the amassing of an egg collection, data from which figure largely in current accounts of the nidification of South African birds. Harold, the other brother, became a skilled bird taxidermist, producing mounted specimens of great artistic beauty. A great many of his mounted birds are in the collection of the Durban Museum, and others were purchased by museums overseas. Dr. J. P. Chapin, the specialist on Zaire birds, remarked while on a visit to Durban some years ago that Millar's bird mounts, purchased for the American Museum of Natural History in New York, were among the finest products of avian taxidermy he had ever encountered. This was praise indeed, because Chapin himself was no mean practitioner of the art. Harold Millar also achieved fame as a delineator of birds, and was engaged for a year or two by the sugar magnate, the late William A. Campbell of Mount Edgecombe, to prepare plates of all the birds then known to occur in South Africa for a book on the subject that Campbell was thinking of sponsoring. Unfortunately, the projected work never appeared and the present resting place of the great collection of Millar bird paintings is unknown to the present writer. One or two birds collected by Millar and new to the South African list at that time (just prior to the Great War) were recorded in the literature by E. C. Chubb (1884-1972), one-time Director of the Durban Museum, who was actively interested in ornithology in the early stages of his professional career.

Study of the literature reveals that many famous ornithologists visited Durban and district before and during the Great War. Among these was C. H. B. Grant (1878-1958) who came to Durban in November 1904, during the course of his travels on behalf of the Rudd zoological exploration of southern Africa. Later in life, Grant joined forces with his colleague, C. W. Mackworth-Praed, in the production of a series of handbooks on African birds.

A collection of birdskins formed at Red Hill, Durban, by E. P. B. Arnold in the first decade of this century and used extensively by Austin Roberts (1883-1948) in the preparation of his *Birds of South Africa*, 1940, is now in the collection of the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria. A somewhat later figure, Lt.-Commander R. B. Wilson, who collected birds in the 1930s at Kloof, immediately inland of Durban, was more intimately associated with Roberts, who named both an invalid race of the Scrub Warbler *Bradypterus barratti 'wilsoni'* (a synonym of *B.b.godfreyi*) and the local race of the Bully Canary *Serinus sulphuratus wilsoni* in his honour. Wilson died in 1955 and appears to have been the last of the local private collectors of birds who made either a direct or indirect contribution to ornithology. His specimens are also in the collection of the Transvaal Museum.

It was not until the 1950s that serious study of the birds of Durban Bay and the surrounding country was again taken up, when staff members of the Durban Museum collected and studied the by then fast diminishing birdlife in an endeavour to preserve material locally for posterity and to determine the status of many woodland and grassland species before they were finally eliminated by the ineluctable march of so-called progress. Discoveries resulting from this professional effort are recorded in the pages of *Birds of Natal and Zululand*

(Clancey, 1964), and in Walter J. Lawson's *Check List of the Birds of Durban*, published in 1966 and again in 1971. Despite all the work on birds alluded to above, covering over 150 years of effort, and the publication of the major treatises of the present author and Walter Lawson, birds new to the region still crop up from time to time, especially among the waders which affect the tidal mud-flats and sand-bars of the Bay. Among some of the species added to the Durban list in the last year or two are the Mongolian Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus atrifrons* and the Broadbilled Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*.

It is sad to reflect that almost hand in hand with the elucidation of the avifauna of this unique locality there came the very factors which have brought about its virtual destruction. As a result of the growth of Durban and its peri-urban sprawl, the evergreen forest that once covered the Berea has disappeared. The vleis lying between Durban Bay and the Umgeni river have long since been filled in, and the land used for playing fields and for sporting and railway development. Nearly gone are the mangrove swamps at the head of Durban Bay, the waters of which are frequently seriously polluted, while much of the Bay has been taken up by harbour development and the growth of tank farms. Several of the interesting birds first discovered in and around where Durban now stands are gone from these parts for ever, among them the Pinkthroated Long-claw and the Greyrumped Swallow. With the growth of Durban into a city of three-quarters of a million people, catering for business, mercantile, manufacturing and holiday interests, it was inevitable that many birds, deprived of their habitat, would follow the large mammals into local extinction. The situation is now completely irreversible. Legislation and a public awareness of the need for wildlife conservation have come too late. However, Durban and its Bay will forever be emblazoned in the annals of South African ornithology, as they remain the type-locality of some twenty-five species of birds, plus many subspecies (Skead (1973)).

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