

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee

Submission No.

Species: Blue-winged pitta *Pitta moluccensis*

Location: Christmas Island

Observation Date: 14 December 1901

Submission Date

Submitted by: Ian McAllan

Address:

Circumstances

The Blue-winged Pitta *Pitta moluccensis* is on the BARC Australian Checklist based upon a specimen collected on Christmas Island in 1901 and housed in the Museum of Zoology, University of Cambridge, UK (Benson 1970; Christidis & Boles 1994). Two records have since been submitted to BARC from mainland Western Australia (Cases 219 & 241), and the author is aware of another four reports, three from mainland Western Australia and one from Christmas Island (c.f. Serventy 1968; Johnstone & Hamilton 1995; Johnstone & Storr 2004; James & McAllan 2014). This submission concerns only the 1901 specimen, which has not been reviewed by BARC. The specimen was examined and photographed during a visit to the Museum of Zoology, University of Cambridge, UK on 29 May 2018.

Benson's account of the specimen.

Benson noted that the specimen was received from H.E. Durham, of whom he gave no other information. He also noted that the specimen had originally been identified as *Pitta vigorsii*, now a subspecies of Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans*. Benson noted that there were some other specimens in the Cambridge University collection that were Christmas Island endemics that were collected by Benson at the same time.

Dr H.E. Durham

In 1901–1903 Dr Herbert Edward Durham was the leader of an expedition from the London School of Tropical Medicine to Christmas Island and Malaya to study beri beri (Lapage 1945). At his time there was an outbreak of the vitamin deficiency disease with 229 people dying on the Island during that year (Adams & Neale 1993). Durham himself was both a medical doctor and botanist, and the collection of birds seems to have been incidental.

The Specimen

The specimen is registered and labelled as 27/Pit/1/r/1 (see figures 1-4). As noted by Benson, the specimen is clearly not an Elegant Pitta as it has a white wing-patch. Nevertheless, it needs to be distinguished from a Mangrove Pitta *Pitta megarhyncha* which is found in Sumatra and Malaya to the north (see Jeyarajasingam & Pearson 2012; Eaton *et al.* 2016). Mangrove Pittas are generally duller than Blue-winged Pittas, both in the green on the back and the orange-buff underparts. They have a longer bill and lack an obvious buff lateral coronial stripe. In all these respects the bird concerned corresponds with a Blue-winged Pitta.



Figure 1. ventral view of specimen

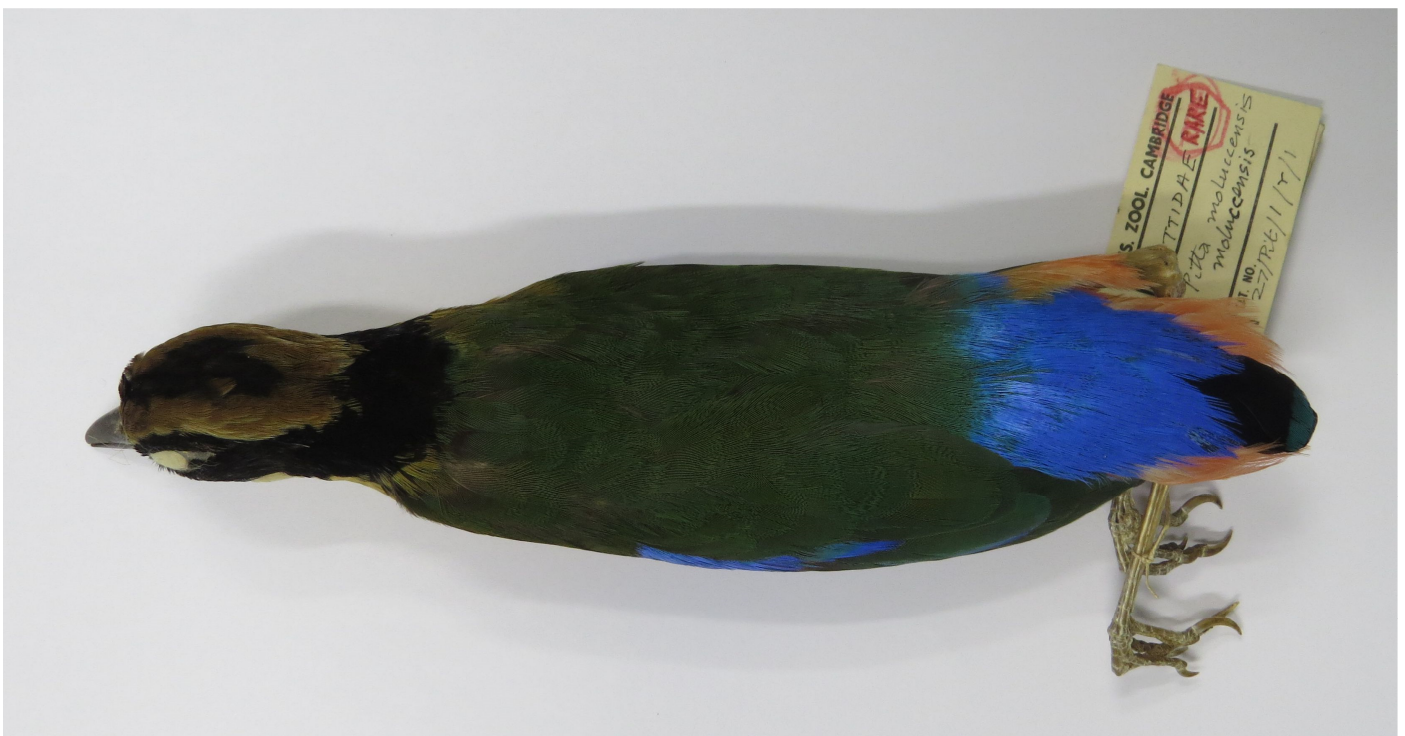


Figure 2. Dorsal view of specimen



Figure 3. Side view of specimen.



Figure 4. Specimen labels.

Discussion

Christidis & Boles (1994) placed the Blue-winged Pitta on the Australian Checklist citing Benson (1970), a reference that acknowledged Serventy (1968) who referred to the earlier records of mummified specimens from 1927 and 1930 which were sent to the Western Australian Museum from the north coast of Western Australia. Johnstone & Darnell (2004) accepted Durham's specimen without reservation. Christidis & Boles (2008) retained the species on the Australian Checklist, and did not mention the records from Western Australia in the 1990s. Durham's bird was included as a valid record by James & McAllan (2014).

This species is recognised as a winter visitor (i.e. Austral summer visitor) to South East Asia, the Malay Peninsula and the Greater Sundas (Wells 2007; Jeyarajasingam & Pearson 2012; Eaton *et al.* 2016).

References

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