

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee

Submission No. 1029
Species: Ruddy-breasted Crake *Zapornia fusca*
Location: Christmas Island
Observation Date: 29 August 1897
Submission Date
Submitted by:

Circumstances

The Ruddy-breasted Crake *Zapornia fusca* is on the BARC Australian Checklist based upon two specimens from Christmas Island (Marchant & Higgins 1993). One was collected by C.W. Andrews (1900) in August 1897 and one was collected by C.A. Gibson-Hill (1947) in August 1940. This submission concerns the 1897 specimen, which was collected by C.W. Andrews during his surveys for Sir John Murray prior to the commencement of phosphate mining on the Island. Andrews gave a minimal description of the bird; however, a corresponding specimen was found during a visit to the Natural History Museum at Tring, UK in May 2018.

About Charles W. Andrews

Charles William Andrews (1866-1924) was employed in the 1890s as an assistant in the British Museum (Natural History), curating the vertebrate fossil collections. In 1897 he obtained leave to take up the post of naturalist, exploring the biota of Christmas Island, a post funded by Sir John Murray. In this capacity he collected as much natural history material as he was able during his ten months on Christmas Island in 1897–1898.

After Andrews had returned to the UK, the bird specimens were donated by Murray to the British Museum (Natural History) in London. The birds were reviewed by Robert Bowdler Sharpe and published in *A Monograph of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)* (Sharpe in Andrews 1900).

The Specimen

Sharpe (1900) recorded that Andrews collected a single female Ruddy-breasted Crake *Porzana fusca* at Flying Fish Cove on Christmas Island on 29 August 1897 (see Figure 1). No description of the bird was given beyond the soft-part colours and no measurements were provided. Sharpe indicated a specimen was collected which was designated number 40. The bird was clearly sexed by dissection, as there is no sexual dimorphism in the species' plumage.

Nowadays the Ruddy-breasted Crake is easy to identify in the field, thanks to modern field guides such as Jeyarajasingam & Pearson (2012) and Eaton *et al.* (2016). However, in the 1890s the specimen would have been compared with the reference collection in the British Museum (Natural History). There is little doubt that Sharpe would have checked carefully before committing his opinion on the identification to print.

Through the intervening years the specimen was not known to have been re-examined.

On 16 May 2018 I found it among the *Porzana fusca* shelves in the cabinets of The Natural History Museum Bird Collection at Tring, UK. It was labelled with the correct information (see attached photographs – Figures 2, 3 and 4).

Order RALLIFORMES.

3. *Limnobænus fuscus*.

Limnobænus fuscus (Linn.), Sharpe, Cat. Brit. Mus., xxiii, p. 146 (1894).

No. 40, ♀ ad. Flying Fish Cove, August 29, 1897.

Iris brownish red, lightest round the pupil; legs reddish brown.

This is an interesting addition to the list. The species may visit the island regularly on migration, but Mr. Andrews only obtained one specimen.

Figure 1. The account of the Ruddy-breasted Crake in Sharpe (1900).



Figure 2 ventral view of specimen



Figure 3. Dorsal view of specimen



Figure 4. Side view of specimen.

The bird has the typical plumage pattern for this species (e.g. see plate 30 in Taylor & Van Perlo 1998), with dark grey-brown plumage above, whitish throat, dull red underparts and pale barring on the undertail coverts. Its size would appear small for the species (see Figure 4), however the wing fits within its typical size range and so the small size would appear to be an artefact of preparation.

Discussion

Marchant & Higgins (1993) accepted both the 1897 and 1940 specimens from Christmas Island. Christidis & Boles (1994) placed Ruddy-breasted Crake on the Australian Checklist citing Marchant & Higgins (1993). Johnstone & Darnell (2004) accepted the records without reservation. Christidis & Boles (2008) retained the species on the Australian Checklist and both were included as valid records by James & McAllan (2014). The species is currently retained on the BARC Australian review list, and is not on the unsubstantiated list. Accepting this record would confirm rather than add the species to the Australian Checklist. The 1940 record was rejected by BARC as there was no specimen (Case 789), however the record of Buffy Fish Owl from Cocos Keeling was accepted (Case 787) even though at that time there was no evidence of the specimen.

It is unclear if this specimen was of a migrant bird as suggested by Sharpe. Eaton *et al.* (2016) indicate the subspecies *erythrothorax* is a migrant to the Greater Sundas, whereas both Jeyarajasingam & Pearson (2012) and Wells (1999) consider there are no migrants in peninsular Malaysia.

References

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