

A single comma in a manuscript alters Mauritius avian history

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Strickland's famous book (1848) on the extinct Dodo *Raphus cucullatus* contains a number of transcribed accounts from early Dutch visitors to Mauritius, including the following passage from an account by Reyer Cornelisz (Commelin 1646) reporting a visit from April to September 1602:

In this country occur tortoises, wallichvogels [Dodos], flamingos, geese, ducks, field-hens, large and small Indian ravens, doves, some of which have red tails (by eating which many of the crew were made sick), grey and green parrots with long tails, some of which were caught [Strickland's translation, except that I have replaced 'crows' with 'ravens' to reflect the original Dutch]

From this it has always been assumed that Cornelisz had seen two sizes of 'Indian Raven', interpreted, when noticed at all, as sexual dimorphism (Hume 2007, Cheke & Hume 2008). In the Mauritian context the term 'Indian Raven' has long been known to refer to the large extinct parrot *Lophospittacus mauritianus* (e.g. Newton & Newton 1876). Holyoak (1973) described a second species as *L.bensoni*, not the smaller 'raven', but the grey parrot of Cornelisz's text, now known to be a *Psittacula*, and named Thirioux's Grey Parrot (Hume 2007). *L.mauritianus*, the Raven Parrot, was strongly sexually dimorphic (Holyoak 1971, Hume 2007), so once that was established, the original text made sense.

More recently however, Parmentier *et al.* (2003) have published a full transcript of the original manuscript containing Cornelisz's account, and it shows that Commelin had edited the bird list, transferring the position of a comma that radically alters the sense of the sentence. The new version reads:

[here is something] about the animals found there in that land, such as tortoises, walchvogels [Dodos], flamingos, geese, ducks, [birds] like field-hens large and small, Indian ravens, also doves, there are also red-tailed doves, there [=through (eating) which] many men have been ill, here are also many grey parrots, finally also green [ones] with long tails, some of which were captured [my translation, with help from Sewel (1766), as many words in the Dutch text are no longer in modern dictionaries]

Thus the adjectives ‘large’ and ‘small’ are shown to clearly refer to the ‘hens’ (*veldthoenders*) not the parrots (*raves*). *Veldthoen* (and cognates), then used back in Holland for partridges, was the standard term used by 17th century Dutch visitors and colonists for the Red Hen *Aphanapteryx bonasia* (Cheke & Hume 2008). We know from subfossil bones (Cheke & Hume 2008, Hume & Walters 2012) that there were two species of flightless rails, the large chicken-sized Red Hen and a smaller species in the genus *Dryolimnas*, the size of a Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* and not yet formally described: Sauzier’s Wood Rail (*ibid.*). Up until now we had no account that clearly referred to the smaller rail, but the revised account from Cornelisz shows that he recognised the two species, and that Sauzier’s Wood Rail was thus still extant when the Dutch first visited the island. There are no further reports, and it presumably succumbed to rat or pig predation on its nests in the years that followed.

References

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Appendix: original Dutch text of the above quotations

1. Commelin (1646: 30): *Op het lant onthouden haer Schilt-padden/ Wallichvogels/ Flamencos/ Gansen/ Eendt-vogels/ Velt-hoenders/ so groot as kleyne Indiaensche Ravens/ Duyven/ daer onder sommige met roo steerten/ (van de welcke menig man sieck geweest is), grauwe ende groene Papegayen, mey lange steerten/ waer van datter sommige ghevangen werden.* [transcribed from the original black-letter text; note the position of the slashes (/), used by Commelin instead of commas, clearly linking the ‘so groot als kleyne’ to the Indian Ravens]

2. Parmentier *et al.* (2003:164): *Item vande gedierten dy er haer opt landt onthouden, als schiltpadden, walchvogels, flamenchus, ganssen, entvoegelen zoo velthoenderen groot en kleyn, Indiaenschen ravers, oyck duyven, daer syn oyck roostarte duyven, daer menich man sieck aff geweest is, hier syn oyck menichete van grauwe papegaeyen, ende oyck groene met lanhe starten, waervander sommige gevanghen worden...* [there should, I believe, be a comma after ‘entvoegelen’]