

## Animals depicted by Marianne North in her Seychelles paintings

Anthony S. Cheke  
139 Hurst St., Oxford OX4 1HE, UK  
[anthony.cheke@dodobooks.com](mailto:anthony.cheke@dodobooks.com)

**Abstract:** The animals depicted in paintings done by Marianne North in the Seychelles in 1883-4 are identified, and an important 'lost' painting of the extinct Seychelles parakeet *Psittacula wardi* is located and published for the first time.

### Introduction

Marianne North is a celebrated botanical artist who travelled the world in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including in 1883-4, as her penultimate expedition, the Seychelles. There she painted 46 or 47 oils (Nos. 348, 358, 458-501 & possibly 356) that have ever since been on show at the Marianne North Gallery at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, UK (Payne 2011), and at least one other currently in private hands. She is immortalised in Seychelles botany through Joseph Hooker naming the genus *Northea* of the *capucin/kapisen*<sup>1</sup> tree after her (Friedmann 2011), now rare and rated Vulnerable by IUCN. All the paintings discussed below can be found in the online gallery of her paintings (<http://www.kew.org/mng/gallery/africa.html>) under the same numbers; they were also catalogued by anon. (1914), each painting having a fairly detailed description by her botanist friend William Botting Helmsley (Ryall 2009), apparently based on notes by North herself.

Although the botanical subjects of North's paintings were mostly identified by the artist herself, and others have since studied and (mostly) admired them, and her renderings of scenery and architecture are also excellent and atmospheric, her animals have been neglected. Although she often included local wildlife in her compositions showing plants in their natural setting, they are less deft than her plants, but nonetheless identifiable to species. In conjunction with the faunal notes included in her autobiography (North 1892) they provide, in the Seychelles, a useful snapshot of wildlife in a period when there are few other natural history records. Apart from Matyot's (2005) identification of hawk-moths, Ponsonby's (1990) tentative assessment of a single bird, and references to an unpublished image of the extinct parakeet *Psittacula wardi* (e.g. Skerrett *et al.* 2001), it appears that the faunal content of the Seychelles *oeuvre* has not been identified or discussed. The descriptions in anon. (1914) often mention the animals by their common name, as does North (1892) in her autobiography, but that is the limit of the published detail. The discussion here is confined to terrestrial animals, plus a marine turtle.

<sup>1</sup> Originally *Northea seychellana* (Sapotaceae), it is now called *N. hornei* because the seeds were named *Mimusops hornei* before the source tree was recognised by science (Friedmann 1994).

## Identifications

Twelve Seychelles paintings include animals, some acknowledged in the title and/or description, some not. Some of these are also mentioned in the autobiography (North 1892, vol.2), but most are not, though additional species feature there (see below); if there is a mention it is cited. If no specific reference is given, identification and data is from Skerrett *et al.* (2001), Bowler (2006) or Gerlach (2007). For details of the plants, see anon. (1914) and the online gallery, but note that the scientific names of plants in the gallery itself and online have not been updated from the 1914 edition of the catalogue, and a good many have changed since; hence, for dicotyledons, Friedmann (1994) should also be consulted.

In addition to the animals described below, several paintings include chickens and geese, and one (No.479) an unidentified flying creature lower left above a juvenile coco-de-mer palm *Lodoicea maldivica*. No.484 has two tiny unidentified birds and a number of crabs, also too small, on inshore rocks.

### Painting 348: *Fruit de Cythere and Sugar Birds and Nest, Seychelles*

Although this painting is listed and exhibited with those done in South Africa, it is identified with the Seychelles both in its title and the following comments in North's autobiography (1879, 2: 289):

A pair of merles had built their nest close to his house and laid eggs in it, and tiny sun-birds were hard at work at a dangling fragile pouch of cotton from the bombax-trees near, close to the verandah where I worked, hanging it on a drooping leaf-stalk of the *Spondias cytherea*, a tree like a very spreading ash.

This was on Praslin; *Spondias* = 'fruit de Cythère'/'*frisiter* in Indian Ocean French/creole (D'Offay & Lionnet 1982). The sunbirds are not well enough drawn to be positively identified from the painting, and the use of 'sugar-birds' in the title may have misled North herself or her assistants in assigning the image to its place in the gallery. 'Sugar-bird' normally refers to the South African genus *Promerops*, unrelated to sunbirds but also nectar-feeders with long curved bills (e.g. Sinclair *et al.* 1993). The birds depicted are consistent with the only sunbird in the granitic Seychelles, the endemic *Nectarinia dussumieri*; merles, or Seychelles bulbuls, also endemic, are *Hypsipetes crassirostris*.

### Painting 458: *A Swamp Plant and Moorhen, Seychelles*

At first glance this entirely bluish bird would appear to be a *Porphyrio* swamphen, and when I first saw it at Kew my thought was that perhaps the enigmatic *poule bleu* had survived 100 years longer than previously thought (Lionnet 1984, Cheke 2013). That possibility is reinforced by a remark of Mauritius Governor Arthur Gordon (1894, 1: 220), on a visit in 1871, that on Praslin "waterfowl flitted about, among them the exquisite *Poule bleue* of the West Indies<sup>2</sup>". However although the body plumage of the bird illustrated is wrong, and it lacks the trademark white line on the flank, the beak and leg colours are correct for *Gallinula chloropus*, the common moorhen that is

<sup>2</sup> American purple gallinule *Porphyrio martinica*.

widespread on Indian Ocean islands including the granitic Seychelles. Rather than the original *poule bleue* surviving, it is possible that both visitors happened to see vagrant Allen's gallinules *Porphyryula alleni* (see Skerrett *et al.* 2001), perhaps less infrequent then, and that North confused them with Moorhens also present, and hence produced the chimaera in the painting. The description (anon. 1914) adds, irrelevantly, "the Moorhen is remarkable for its very large feet".

Painting 459: *Wormia and Flagellaria in the Seychelles*

The hawk-moth illustrated is *Hippotion osiris* (Matyot 2005), a species found in the Seychelles and Madagascar.

Painting 469: *Veloutier Blanc and pair of Martins, Seychelles*

'Martin'/marten is the local French/creole name for the common myna *Acridotheres tristis* (d'Offay & Lionnet 1982, Skerrett *et al.* 2003), an Indian species introduced into the Seychelles from Mauritius around 1830-35 (Cheke 2010). North (1879, 2: 290), on Praslin, described the birds she illustrated; mynas are good mimics:

There were also two martins, much like the mynah-birds of India, with yellow beaks and feet. They were most impudent, and would come and perch on the chairs of the verandah, chase the cocks and hens, and defy the dogs, whistling most pertinaciously, and calling "Toby, Toby, Toby !" till the dog ran half mad.

Painting 472: *Saponaire or Periwinkle and Green Frogs in Mahe*

The frogs depicted are *Tachycnemis seychellensis*, an endemic species widespread on the larger islands (Gerlach 2007). At the foot of the picture there is a black snail which most closely resembles the black form of the endemic species *Pachnodus kantilali*, found only on the hills of Mahé above 600m a.s.l. (Gerlach 1987, Justin Gerlach pers.comm.); the artist may have found it when she climbed up over the central ridge to Venn's Town (2: 304-5).

Painting 477: *Female Coco de Mer bearing Fruit covered with small Green Lizards*

Painting the palm fruits on Curieuse, North picked up the characteristic behaviour of day geckos crowding onto *Lodoicea* infructescences. They are too tiny to be identified directly from the painting, but as she called them 'small' they will have been *Phelsuma astriata*, which fits their size as against the fruit in the artwork. She commented (North 1879, 2: 291):

I rested my painting-board on one of the great fan leaves, and drew the whole mass of fruit and buds in perfect security, though the slightest slip or cramp would have put an end both to the sketch and to me. Bright green lizards were darting about all the time, over both the subject and the sketch, making the nuts and leaves look dull by contrast.

Painting 482: *Two trailing-plants with Lizard and Moth from Ile Aride, Seychelles*

The hawk-moth is *Hippotion eson* (Matyot 2005), the day-gecko *Phelsuma*

*astriata*, the only species present on Aride (Cheke 1984, Radtkey 1996).

Painting 483: *Emile's Palm House, Praslin, Seychelles*

On the beach in front of the house is a very large hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*, locally known as *caret/kare* (d'Offay & Lionnet 1982), the source of commercial tortoise-shell. Of a different occasion off La Digue she wrote (1879, 2: 295):

...once they speared a hawk's-head turtle or "carre" which a shark was trying to get into his mouth : a rather large morsel, as it was over three feet long. I bought it of the sailors for £2 : 10s., the value of the tortoise-shell back. Catching them is the principal aim of sailors in those islands, and they divide the profits made by each boat, one man often making ten pounds in a season. The one I bought was found to be full of eggs, which were collected in a pail, buried in the sand near the house, and kept till they hatched, after which they were kept another six weeks with difficulty, as they have an inclination to run into the sea as soon as they leave their shells, and would be quickly gobbled up if they did. They are fed on fish, and some of the natives keep them till their shells become saleable ; but to do this is more trouble than they are worth.

The description (anon. 1914) adds: "secured to one of the trees is a Hawkshead Tortoise, whose shell is the fortune of the fishermen of the islands".

Painting 487: *Flowers of a bush and Pitcher Plant, Mahe*

This picture includes two chameleons *Archaius* (formerly *Calumma*) *tigris*, an endemic species found only on Mahé, Silhouette and Praslin (Gerlach 2007).

Painting 489: *A Native Orchid and Butterflies, Mahe, Seychelles*

The two butterflies are Seychelles crow *Euploea mitra*, now Endangered (Gerlach *et al.* 2005) and apparently confined to the central ridge on Mahé (Bowler 2006).

Painting 496: *The Seychelles Pitcher Plant in blossom and Chameleon*

Another representation of *Archaius tigris*.

Painting 501: *Foliage, Flowers, and Fruit of the Capucin Tree of the Seychelles*

Unmentioned in either title or description is the bright red male cardinal fody *Foudia madagascariensis*; Ponsonby (1990) tentatively identified the bird, and rightly pointed out that it should have had a black bill<sup>3</sup>. The species was introduced on Mahé around 1860, and North's mention of cardinal fodies on Praslin is the first for that island following their introduction to the granitics (Cheke & Rocamora in press), and she also reported paradise flycatchers *Terpsiphone corvina* there, which have since died out:

<sup>3</sup> Adult male *Foudia madagascariensis* have black bills in full red nuptial plumage (as painted by North), but in eclipse plumage have palish brown bills like females (Skerrett *et al.* 2001).

We walked across the island to the north shore, the last part of the road being through miles of cocoa-nut plantations, where we saw some few birds, including “whydah-birds” with long tails [i.e. flycatchers<sup>4</sup>], also a red foudia with its brown wives. The Creoles had driven nearly all birds away, and they had taken refuge on an outside island called Marianne, from whence the doctor had lately imported some of different sorts to Praslin, much to the disgust of the natives.

This seems to imply that ‘the doctor’ (James Brooks, see below) had already been supplementing flycatcher numbers on Praslin from Marianne, then presumably still rat-free with its original forest (Cheke 2013), and may have been responsible for introducing the cardinal fody to Praslin, which would explain why the ‘natives’ were disgusted. It is a major pest of rice crops, and was generally considered by the end of the 19th century to be the reason why rice cultivation had been abandoned in the islands (Cheke & Rocamora in press).

Private collection: [*Caesalpinia* and two parakeets, Mahé; Fig 1.]

This painting and its subjects are described in North’s autobiography (1879, 2: 302) in the following terms:

He [‘Dr B.’<sup>5</sup>] and his Greek wife were very kind and hospitable in their offers to me. I went one day to their house, and painted their parrots, which came originally from Silhouette: queer, misshapen birds, with enormous beaks and patches of red and yellow badly put on, one of them having a black ring round its neck. Both were quite helplessly bullied by common pigeons, which came and ate up their food, while they jabbered in a melancholy way, and submitted. They had absolutely no tops to their heads, which perhaps accounted for their stupidity. They had a stand on the back verandah, where they slept and were fed. They were not tied up, but went and stole their own fruit off the neighbouring trees.

The birds are endemic Seychelles parakeets *Psittacula wardi*, which became extinct around 1900 (Skerrett *et al.* 2001, Cheke 2013). This is the only time the species was depicted alive, and the left-hand bird, showing paler underparts and lacking a neck ring, is clearly a juvenile, whose plumage was previously unknown. Although, as mentioned earlier, North’s painting was known from her writings, no representation of it has previously been published; her own title for this image is not known. The painting itself is currently owned by the family of Tom North, great grandson of Marianne’s brother Charles. It was bought back by the family at auction from Bonhams in the early 1990s (Tom North pers. comm.); precise sale details are not available, nor the

<sup>4</sup> The local name of the paradise flycatcher is *veuve/vev* (Skerrett *et al.* 2003), ‘widow’, which North, having recently been in South Africa, assimilated to the unrelated but similarly long-tailed, largely black, widow-birds *Euplectes* spp. and whydahs *Vidua* spp. (Sinclair *et al.* 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Personal names were all included in full in North’s original manuscript, still in the family archives, but edited out by her sister when preparing it for publication (Tom North, pers. comm.). ‘Dr B.’ is however easily identifiable from island histories as colonial medical officer Dr James Brooks (see McAteer 2000), but in any case the words “Dr and Mrs Brooks” have escaped the editor a few lines further on!





**Fig.1.** Marianne North's painting of the extinct endemic Seychelles parakeet *Psittacula wardi*, with the tropical garden ornamental *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, originally from tropical America (photo by Bob Billington, reproduced with permission of Tom North).

intervening whereabouts of the painting. The colours in the parrot painting are a lot more muted than North's other oils done in the Seychelles, both before and after this one; it is possible that the different conditions it has experienced compared with the Kew collection has resulted in some fading.

One might expect 'common pigeons' to have been feral pigeons *Columba livia*, but these appear not to have been introduced until the 1970s (Skerrett *et al.* 2001), and given the remarks North made about very bold 'wild doves' (below), it seems probable that the bullies were in fact Malagasy turtle doves *Nesoenas picturata*.

### **Animal observations not echoed in paintings**

North's autobiography (1897, vol.2) includes further animal notes, which warrant some comment. Almost the first things she noticed on arrival at Mahé were "exquisite turquoise crabs with red legs", semi-terrestrial fiddler crabs *Uca* sp., probably *U. tetragonon*<sup>6</sup>. Later, on Curieuse, she mentioned big black crabs and 'soldier-crabs' (i.e. terrestrial hermit crabs), but not in enough detail to identify. On Praslin (p.296-7) she discussed Dr Hoad's former pet flying fox *Pteropus seychellensis*, and on Mahé chez 'Mrs E.'<sup>7</sup> (p.300) "Four wild doves also used to come and feed on the verandah, so impudent that they never moved away when the dog Snap walked through them". These were no doubt the Malagasy turtle dove *Nesoenas picturata*, probably the nominate form *N. p. picturata*, which had more or less replaced the native race *rostrata* on Mahé a decade earlier (Oustalet 1878). On Long Island, not long before her departure, she watched a Seychelles kestrel *Falco araea* catch a day-gecko *Phelsuma* sp.:

One afternoon I heard a rustle close to where I was sitting under the trees, and saw a small hawk, no bigger than a thrush, pick up a green lizard, look defiantly at me for a moment, then fly away with its body. The tail fell to the ground, and began waltzing round and round. I took out my watch and timed how long it continued to move; it was quite half an hour, the last movement being just at the tip of the tail, and by that time it was quite covered with small black ants, which carried it off bit by bit, not only into their principal hole, but into little back doors which they had in a long crack of the dry ground. The next morning there was none of the tail to be found.

This is the first direct observation of the kestrel feeding, although Newton (1867) had noted unspecified lizards in the gut of specimens he collected.

<sup>6</sup> Bowler (2006; poor photo) only takes fiddler crabs to genus, High (n.d.) has a better photo but also only mentions the genus – there are 3 species in the Seychelles (Haig 1984), and identification to species is from photos online at: [http://www.fiddlercrab.info/uca\\_photos.html](http://www.fiddlercrab.info/uca_photos.html). Ponsonby's biography (1990) mentions in the same sentence as the fiddler crabs that North saw "spiders who [sic] were 'rampant and enormous'" – there seems to be no such reference in the entire text of volume 2 of North's autobiography (1879). I searched the online OCR 'full text' on Archive.org (the Toronto library version, not the very poorly OCR'd Google Books version), so perhaps this information came from an unpublished letter; there are, of course, abundant, large and conspicuous orb-web spiders *Nephila inaurata* in the Seychelles (Bowler 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Presumably the wife of Henry Estridge, Collector of Taxes (McAteer 2000); North described his office as "the Treasury".

She mentions seabirds only twice (pp.293-4, 305). From high up on Mahé “one saw a long stretch of wild mountain coast, and many islands, some 2000 feet below, across which long-tailed boatswain-birds were always flying”, as these birds, white-tailed tropic-birds *Phaethon lepturus*, still do. For the other species, on Curieuse, she, or her editor, was fed a seriously wrong scientific name:

There was no water, only that which filtered through the sand into wells from the sea, and the low bushes near the rocks were covered with small terns (*Sterna velox*) with white heads, so tame that they let one take them off their nests without attempting to escape. Cruel little Johnnie collected some dozen, and tied them in a bunch by their feet, dying and dead, to send to his mother by the next boat. The owner of the island was making quite a fortune by selling them in Mahe to make pigeon-pies (very fishy).

Tame white-headed terns must have been Fairy Terns *Gygis alba*, for which culinary use is generally unusual. ‘*Sterna velox*’ was a combination used at the time for crested terns *Sterna* (= *Thalasseus*) *bergii*.

“Centipedes”, wrote North (2: 301) “are the only evil things in the island” (Mahé), referring to animals 3-5 inches long (75-125mm) with a sting like “like touching a red-hot poker”, presumably *Scolopendra subspinipes*, which can reach 8”/200mm (Bowler 2006).

Finally North discussed the keeping of giant tortoises *Dipsochelys dussumieri* (*Aldabrachelys gigantea* auct.) (pp.287-8, 296-7); her brief but important contribution is discussed by Cheke & Bour (2013).

## Images of Madagascar wildlife

Displayed with paintings done in South Africa, and included with that country in the printed catalogue are two paintings of subjects from Madagascar that also include animals. However, one of these, and possibly both, were painted in the Seychelles. Although North intended to visit Madagascar (& Mauritius) after South Africa, she had to abort the trip from ill-health and never went there (North 1879, anon. 1914).

### Painting 356: *Angraecum* and *Urania* Moth of Madagascar

Both orchid (*A. sesquipedale*) and moth are Malagasy endemics, painted according to Payne (2011) in South Africa. The moth an excellent rendering of what is now called the Madagascar sunset moth *Chrysidia rhipheus*<sup>8</sup>. There is nothing in the autobiography to indicate where this might have been painted, but climatically the Seychelles would have been a more likely place to cultivate the orchid. The moth’s caterpillar has very specific food requirements, eating only *Omphalea* spp. (Euphorbiaceae), of which no species occur in either South Africa or the Seychelles. Hence it appears that North must have painted *Chrysidia* from a preserved specimen. There are two native species of *Angraecum* in the Seychelles (Lionnet n.d., Jolliffe

<sup>8</sup> Identification and life-history information from the excellent article in Wikipedia, accessed 31.7.2013 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chrysidia\\_rhipheus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chrysidia_rhipheus)).



2010), both clearly different from the Malagasy species depicted in No.356; North painted the commoner one *A. eburneum*, *fler payanke* [*fleur paille-en-queue*] now the Seychelles national flower, in No.489.

#### Painting 358: *Ordeal Plant or Tanghin and Parakeets of Madagascar*

The only references to seeing the ‘ordeal plant’ or ‘tanghinia’ in the autobiography are in the Seychelles (1879, 2: 300 & 304), and it is presumably there that she painted it. The plant in the painting appears not to be the small-flowered *Cerbera venenifera*<sup>9</sup>, typical of Madagascar, but the somewhat larger flowered *C. manghas* still common in the Seychelles; the two forms may be conspecific (Friedmann 1994). At the time the accompanying grey-headed lovebirds *Agapornis canus*, Malagasy endemics, were popular cage-birds in the colonial islands of the Indian Ocean, establishing feral populations on several (e.g. Cheke & Hume 2008), and are very likely to have been kept in the Seychelles as they were elsewhere – although they did not escape into the wild there until some 20 years later (Skerrett *et al.* 2001).

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<sup>9</sup> The species is given as *C. tanghin* in the catalogue (anon. 1914). The Malagasy and Seychelles forms had not been distinguished at the time of North’s visit (Baker 1877), but both apparently occurred together in the Seychelles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Friedmann 1994). The surviving Seychelles plant is still called *tanghin* in local French/creole (*ibid.*).

*Phelsuma* 21: 4-19.

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