

Correcting an egregious error – rediscovering early images of the Seychelles Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas pulcherrimus*, with a comment on Sonnerat’s original misapplied geographical location.

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The misidentification

Ever since Tuijn (1969) first drew attention to two paintings attributed to Gijsbertus Haasbroek held in the Artis-Bibliotheek of Amsterdam University, these watercolours of a living *Alectroenas* pigeon from 1790 have been uncritically assigned to the extinct Mauritian species *A. nitidissimus* (Fuller 2000, Cheke & Hume 2008, Hume 2011, 2017, Winters 2011, 2013, Hume & Walters 2012, Hume & Winters 2015). Until, that is, they were re-assessed by Knolle & Vlek (2017: end-note p.271) who discovered (and re-printed) a third cognate Haasbroek painting (Fig.2) from a 2016 Tajan sale in Paris, where it was simply listed as ‘Étude d’oiseau exotique’ and attributed to ‘Haalbouck’ [*sic*]¹. Winters (2020) mentioned this correction, also slipped into a footnote. The second smaller painting noted by Tuijn (1969) is almost identical to the larger (seen in Fig.1) and is presumably copied from it²; I will not discuss it further.

Tuijn (1969) quoted a manuscript note by Arnout Vosmaer attached to the larger painting saying that the birds, only one of which was alive, “were sent to me [in 1790] from the Cape, but [actually] came from the island Mauritius”. This mention of Mauritius as source, and the fact that the published image in Tuijn’s paper was in monochrome, seems to have blinded later writers, their reviewers and readers (including myself), even when the coloured image resurfaced (Hume 2011, 2017, Winters 2011, 2013, Hume & Walters 2012, Hume & Winters 2015), to retaining the Mauritian identification. However it is perfectly clear from the coloured original (Fig.1), reproduced in Hume (2011), Winters (2011) and Hume & Winters (2015), that the bird is in fact a Seychelles *pizon olande* (Skerrett *et al.* 2003), *A. pulcherrimus* – the tail is dark blue (not red) and the crown is red (not white); likewise the 2016 Tajan sale painting (Fig.2). The accuracy of the artist’s rendering of the display behaviour of the pigeon in the Artis-Bibliotheek painting (Fig.1) is confirmed by its close similarity to the artwork of a Seychelles Blue Pigeon displaying in plate 36 of Skerrett *et al.*’s field guide (2001). Vosmaer noted the local name as ‘*pavillon hollandais*’, clearly a version, or corruption, of the term *pigeon hollandais* used for the bird in both Mauritius and Seychelles. Both pigeon species show some degree of red, white and blue, the colours of the Dutch *pavillon* (flag) – before the 1789 revolution the French flag was gold fleur de lys on a white background, not the current *tricolore* (red, white & blue).

While Vosmaer’s mention of Mauritius as source has misled, it is nevertheless probably correct, insofar as any products (wildlife included) from the Seychelles will have been shipped via Mauritius at that date (Toussaint 1957), and so would likely have been reported as ‘from Mauritius’, of which the Seychelles were then a dependency.

1 <https://auction.tajan.com/fr/asp/fullCatalogue.asp?salelot=1640+++++73+&refno=++498997&saletype=>

2 It differs in that a head-&-shoulders image of the bird with the ‘ruff’ in the normal unraised condition is added (apparently mirror-reversed from Fig.2), and in being signed by G. Haasbroeck (Tuijn 1969).



Figure 1. The 1790 watercolour of a Seychelles Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas pulcherrimus* held in the Artis-Bibliotheek of the University of Amsterdam, formerly identified as a Mauritius Blue Pigeon or Pigeon Hollandais *A. nitidissima* (from Hume 2011).



Figure 2. Painting of a Seychelles Blue Pigeon by Gijsbertus Haasbroek c.1790 offered for sale by Tajan in Paris in 2016 as an ‘Étude d’oiseau exotique’ (see text).

A back-story of error and deceit

While the above embarrassing mistake is recent, the species’s history began with a grosser error, or more probably a deceit. Pierre Sonnerat (1776) described and illustrated the species (Fig.3), but bizarrely claimed it came from ‘Antigue’ (error for Antique), the western coastal province of the Philippine island of Panay. There has been much speculation, summarised by Ly-Tio-Fane (1978), as to why Sonnerat rather too frequently gave erroneous localities for species he described. In this case, as in several others, it appears that he decided to use material he had worked on and drawn for his sometime employer in Mauritius, Philibert Commerson, after the latter died in 1773 and his manuscripts were shipped to Paris, to lie unused for decades (Ly-Tio-Fane 1978). Commerson had sought and received material from the Seychelles (Ly-Tio-Fane 1978, Monnier *et al.* 1993, Cheke 2008), and notoriously pirated Commerson’s description of the coco-de-mer *Lodoicea maldivica*, publishing the first description himself (Sonnerat 1776), giving the impression that he had been to the Seychelles, which in fact he never visited (Ly-Tio-Fane 1978, Monnier *et al.* 1993). At least he gave the correct locality for that species, but why he allocated the Blue Pigeon to the Philippines, and falsified the origin of numerous other species (e.g. Lysacht 1952, 1956) remains a mystery. Sonnerat (1782) was also the first to describe the pigeon’s Mauritian counterpart, the original *pigeon hollandais*, this time with a correct locality, but oddly not mentioning its great similarity to the species, allegedly from Panay, that he had described only six years earlier. His

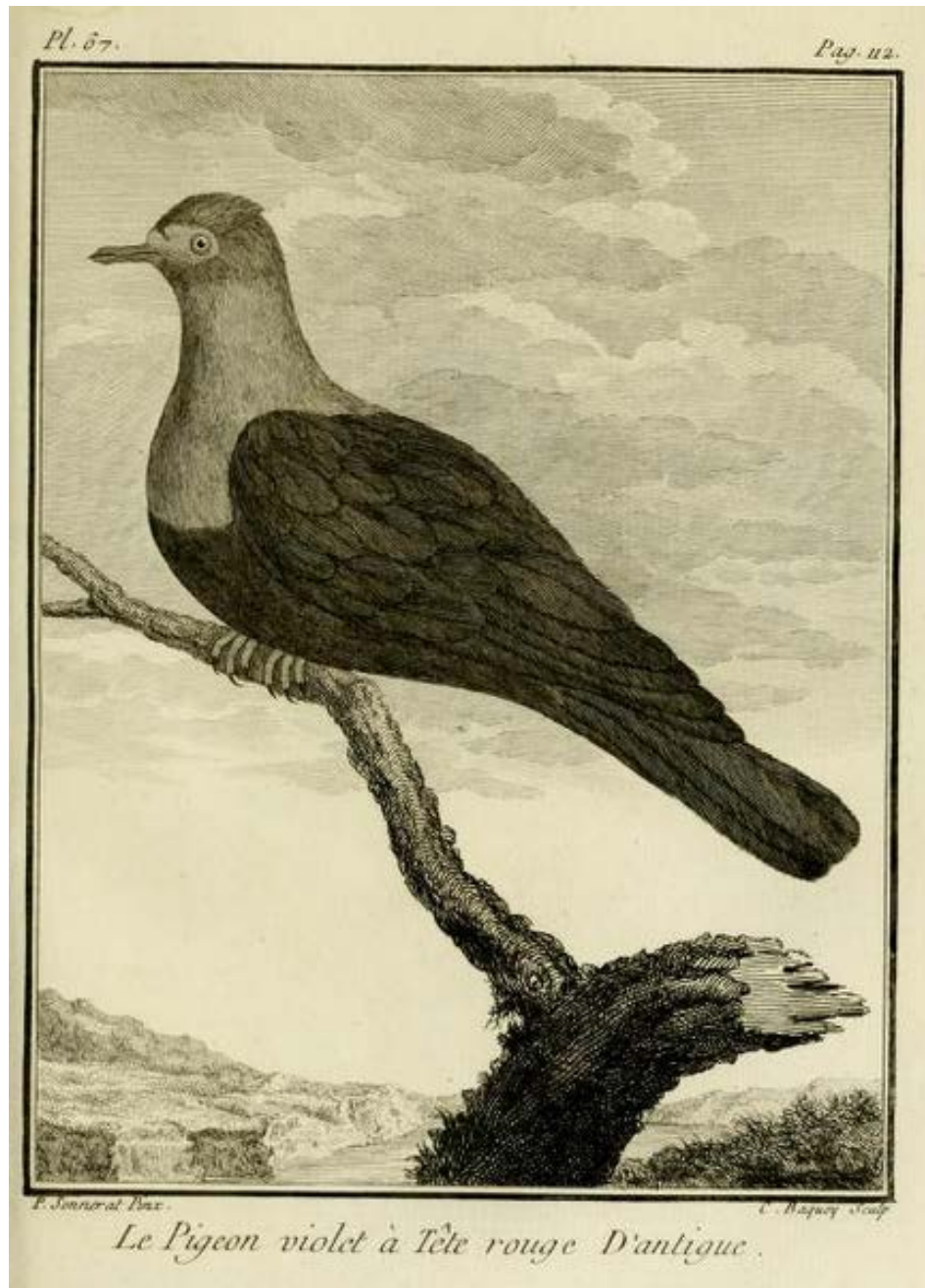


Figure 3. Image of the Seychelles Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas pulcherrimus* from Sonnerat (1776).

description of the Seychelles Blue Pigeon was accurate, and clearly taken from a live bird or fresh specimen (or possibly from Commerson's notes on such a specimen):

Le Pigeon violet à tête rouge d'Antîque [error for Antique], est de la grosseur du Pigeon qu'on nomme en France le Jacobin; une membrane charnue, d'un rouge assez vif, s'étend de chaque côté depuis l'origine de la partie supérieure du bec jusques pardelà les yeux qu'elle entoure ; le sommet de la tête est couvert de plumes fines, qui forment une calotte d'un rouge vif; le col, le haut du dos & le haut de la poitrine- sont d'un gris bleuâtre, plus clair sur la poitrine ; le reste du corps, savoir le dos, le ventre, les ailes, la queue, est d'un noir velouté changeant: en violet &; renvoyant quelques reflets bleuâtres. Les pieds & le bec font gris ; l'iris est composée d'un large cercle rouge , & d'un plus étroit, qui est gris.

The Violet Pigeon with a red head from Antique is the size of the Pigeon known in France as the Jacobin³ ; a fleshy membrane, of brightish red, extends on each side from the base of the upper mandible to just beyond the

3 The Jacobin is an ancient fancy breed of domestic pigeon *Columba livia* that has a raised ruff around the neck (Wikipedia; http://svdp.de/pages_eng/Per%FCckentauben_eng.htm) a bit like that of *Alectroenas* fruit-pigeons

eyes, which it encircles.. The top of the head is covered in neat feathers, forming a bright red skull-cap. The neck, the upper upper back and upper breast are a bluish grey, paler on the breast. The rest of the body, that is the back, the belly, the wings, the tail and the breast are a changeable velvety black – toward violet and also showing some bluish reflections. The feet and the bill are grey ; the iris is composed of a wide red circle and a narrower one which is grey [my translation].

Sonnerat, in keeping with French practice at the time, did not use Linnean binomial nomenclature, leaving it open to others to apply modern scientific names to his new species. Thus a few years later Giovanni Scopoli (1786-88) gave both the new *Alectroenas* species Linnean names. Scopoli hid his nomenclatural acts in a subsection, ‘Specimen Zoologicum’, in the 1786 part of a rare book in Latin ostensibly on the flora and fauna of Insubria (=Lombardy in Italy) – a book so obscure, but with such important namings, that Cambridge professor Alfred Newton (1882) felt obliged to edit and reprint the ornithological sections for the wider benefit. Scopoli used the catch-all genus *Columba* for all his pigeons – *C. pulcherrima* for the Seychelles bird, *C. nitidissima* for the Mauritian (respectively birds 98 and 89 in Newton’s edition).

Acknowledgements

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