

Birds in Early Australian History

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Birds are inextricably entwined with early Australian history. They have been used in debates about which outsiders came here first, they feature in many of the earliest contacts made, and the frequent sightings recorded by those first maritime explorers initiated the unveiling of our avifauna. It must be remembered, however, that the earliest observations about Australian birds clearly belong to Indigenous Australians. They, for example, incorporated many details of the physical and behavioural characteristics of our avian friends into their myths and legends, deep in our prehistory. Some of those myths, of mischievous Willy-wagtails, of malicious Crows and naïve Pelicans, have indeed found their way into our literature and become part of our national heritage. Furthermore, Indigenous Australians are responsible for the earliest known representations of Australian birds, such as the depiction of an Emu in a rock art panel known as “The Emu Hunter”, at Dangurrung in the Northern Territory, this being 15,000 years old.

In terms of our more recent history it is now well established that Willem Janszoon in the *Duyfken* in March 1606, and Luis Vaez de Torres in *San Pedro* in July 1606, were the first Europeans to have come into contact with Australia. Nevertheless, there are many claims that others preceded them, the Chinese, the Portuguese, Spanish, French, even the mysterious Baijini, for example. All these claims rest not on an accurate chart or an authenticated account but speculation and coincidence. And some of these speculative claims have relied on Australian birds as proof of their contention. George Jennison, for example, argued in 1928 that the Australian Lyrebird was represented in Androvandi’s “Natural History”, published in 1599, and that someone from Europe must therefore have visited Australia prior to that date. He was, alas, on shaky ground, as the bird in that illustration, called “Gallus indicus”, was likened by others to a Pheasant, a Peacock, or even the mythical Phoenix. Consequently Jennison’s case was not taken too seriously.

Another of these theories, this time arguing that the Portuguese had encountered Australia some time in the 1500s, was put forward by Donald Trounson in 1988. Trounson drew attention to the fact that forty 16th century globes and maps had a legend inscribed on them referring to a land called “Psitacorum regio”, part of a mythical Southland, “Pars Continentis Australis”, supposedly circling the southern oceans for a distance of at least 3,600 kilometres. “Psitacorum regio”, the “Land of Parrots”, was located on these maps about 1,200 kilometres due south of the Cape of Good Hope. The parrots found there were said to be three cubits (1.7 metres) long. Trounson drew attention to the fact that these old maps also show a northward projection of the Southland, called the Land or Kingdom of Maletur, coinciding with much of what is now Western Australia. He argued this may have been the “Land of Parrots” because of the large White-tailed Black Cockatoo found in the south west of Western Australia and that this may have been evidence of early visitation by the Portuguese. Unfortunately the White-tailed Black Cockatoo is only 55-60 centimetres

long, a rather large discrepancy. And if they were such strikingly large birds, one might think they would have been noticed by the Dutch (1616 onward), English (1622) and French (1687) mariners who encountered, in some cases collided, with the coasts and islands of Western Australian. It was not until 31 May 1801 that they were first noted by Europeans, when some were seen by a shore party from the Baudin Expedition at Bunker Bay in Geographe Bay. Moreover, a more likely explanation for the “*Psitacorum regio*” inscription is that it was an error arising from a translation and misplacement of “*Papagalli terra*” in Brazil. This appears on the same series of maps, and refers to the large Macaws found there. These magnificent birds caused a sensation when first brought back to Portugal in 1501.

The gift of a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo to Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), a White Cockatoo in a painting by Andrea Mantegna in 1496, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos in Tudor portraits, and by 17th century Dutch painters Verelst and de Hondecoeter, has also triggered speculation of some unrecorded expedition to Australia returning with these birds. But the specimens concerned are believed to have come from New Guinea where a large sub-species related to the Australian Sulphur-crested Cockatoo are to be found. These were probably obtained by traders who also brought back the skins of Birds of Paradise from New Guinea.

The Sulphur-crested Cockatoo is an example marking a period when species found in Australia, as well as on islands in the region, particularly east of the Wallace Line, first began to be reported. Prado y Tovar, who was the actual commander of Torres two ships, noted Sulphur-crested Cockatoos as they skirted the south coast of New Guinea and began to pick their way through Torres Strait. The Cassowary, its name probably from a Papuan language, *kasu* [horned] *weri* [head], was another, with one being captured on the island of Ceram, just to the west of New Guinea in 1595. It was taken back to Holland in the *Amsterdam* and ultimately given to the Hapsburg Emperor Rudolph II. Prado was also given one in August 1606 in south east New Guinea.

Sightings of Australian birds in Australian territorial waters began to occur almost from the moment European explorers appeared in 1606. It is not known if the crew of the *Duyfken* made any such observations, the original journal has been lost, but in one of those strange coincidences we find that the name of the *Duyfken*, as normally translated, means “Little Dove”. So the honour of first authenticated sighting of an Australian bird in Australian waters by these interlopers from the other side of the world lies with Torres, or more accurately Prado, in Torres Strait. As they approached what is now known as Sassi Island in late September 1606 Prado recounted that “we reached a flat island with good bottom where we anchored and found plenty of very large pigeons all white.” The bird in question was the Pied Imperial-Pigeon, better known as the Torres Strait Pigeon. It was to be the first of 40 endemic species seen and recorded in logs, journals and other such accounts prior to 1770.

Another 12 years would pass before the next sightings of Australian birds are mentioned. This came in 1618 when the Dutch chanced on the west coast of the Southland for the second time. The captain of the *Zeewolf*, Haevick Claeszoon, wrote in a letter that off the central west coast, near Geraldton, they had seen “white pintails and some schaerstaertges,” the latter being translated as “Little Scissor-tails.” Shortly after, in 1628, the first Australian geographical feature to be named after a bird began

to appear on maps and charts. In this instance Turtledove Shoal, south of the Abrolhos Islands, was actually named after another Dutch ship, the *Tortelduiff*, which is believed to have stumbled on it when passing in late May or early June 1624.

The Batavia Mutiny of 1629 was one of the most brutal episodes of Australian history, with the mutineers stranded on the northern Abrolhos Islands slaughtering about 125 innocent and defenceless men, women and children. Upon his return from Java in September 1629 Captain Pelsaert put down the mutiny and then spent the next couple of months recovering anything of value from the wreck of the *Batavia*. In the meantime the Mutiny was investigated, the guilty tried and sentenced, and six of the mutineers were hanged, several having their hands cut off as part of their punishment. As he was departing Pelsaert took time to describe in detail some of the wildlife they had encountered, including “grey turtle-doves”, the Brush Bronzewing, and the Tammar Wallaby found on East and West Wallabi Islands, the latter being first description of an Australian marsupial. Before returning to Java Pelsaert also deposited two of the mutineers, Wouter Loos and Jan Pelgrom de Bye, on the mainland, probably at Hutt River, on 16 November 1629, the first Europeans to become residents of Australia, albeit unwillingly.

The 17th century was the period in Australian history dominated by Dutch exploration and contact. Incidental references to birds are scattered throughout accounts from the period, although often they were fairly nondescript, simply mentioning sightings of “land-birds,” “sanderlings” (“little beach walkers”) or “gulls”. Occasionally they were a little more forthcoming, so that we know that Carstensz saw Herons along the west coast of Cape York in 1623, that van Roosenbergh, the supercargo on the *Wapen van Hoorn* spotted Stormy Petrels as they passed by Shark Bay in 1627 and Tasman, Cape Barren Geese, on the shores of Tasmania in 1642. An interesting example was Antonie Caen’s description of a bird seen near Bernier Island, just north of Shark Bay, in 1636. He reported “two stately birds as large as swans, which had orange yellow bills and were almost half a yard long”. They were in fact Black Swans. Willem de Vlamingh is usually identified with the European discovery of the Black Swan, having captured two on the Swan River on 6 January 1697 in the course of his expedition up the west coast of Western Australia. Unfortunately those specimens, possibly the first Australian birds to be collected, died en route back to Holland, but their very existence caused a sensation, confirming notions that New Holland was the antithesis of what passed for the “civilized” world.

An engraving showing the Black Swans was published in Valentijn’s *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indien* in 1724-26, but the earliest known European representations of Australian birds arose as a result of one of the privateer William Dampier’s visits to Australia. Dampier had first called at King Sound and Buccaneer Archipelago in the Kimberley region in 1688, although on that visit he only made passing references to birds. He was far more observant, and expansive, however, when he returned in the *Roebuck* to Shark Bay in 1699, and his draughtsman drew passable illustrations of such birds as the Bridled Tern, Red-necked Avocet, Common Noddy and Pied Oystercatcher. These subsequently appeared in Dampier’s *Voyage to New Holland* in 1703.

The early history of Australian ornithology began to pass with the voyage of the *Endeavour* up Australia’s east coast in 1770. This also marked the commencement of the scientific study of Australian birds, with Swedish zoologist, student of Linnaeus,

and Banks' assistant, Daniel Solander being credited with the first scientific description of an endemic Australian bird, the Bustard, in the course of that voyage. Similarly, the ship's artist Sydney Parkinson's innumerable sketches, drawings and watercolours presaged the era of professional illustration of Australian birdlife.

Once the British colony at Sydney Cove was established in 1788 the documentation, illustration and scientific description of Australian birds began in earnest. Rather curiously, the endearing Emu, largest and most iconic of our Australian birds, one of the symbols of our nation, had yet to be seen by Europeans up to that point in time. While Vlamingh's men at Swan River in 1697 had reported seeing "several kinds of birds which were very big but very timid," there was no definite sighting until February 1788 when an Emu was shot by a convict, near what is now central Sydney. The name that the colonists applied to this singular creature, "Emu" is not however, as many presume, an Aboriginal one. While it harks back to a time well before Europeans encountered Australia, it was in actual fact a Portuguese term, one they applied to any large bird, such as the Rhea of South America and the Ostrich of South Africa. There are even claims that the word ultimately derives from the Arabic "Na'ema" [Ostrich]. Whatever the case, one can of course be certain its original Indigenous name preceded either of these by more than 40,000 years. But then birds are like that in Australia, they seem to have a bit of a history.