

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

THE IDENTITY OF *SERICORNIS TYRANNULA* DE VIS

Sericornis tyrannula was described by De Vis (1905) from a single specimen in the Queensland Museum said to have been collected by Kendall Broadbent at Charleville in central Queensland. This specimen has been reported as untraceable since at least the 1920's, and its identity has been a matter of longstanding dispute (Mathews 1922, 1930; Marshall 1932; Campbell 1935; Mayr 1937, 1962). Describing *S. tyrannula*, De Vis (1905) wrote:

'The Scrub wren under view appears to be easily distinguished by its diminutive size and rufous undertail from those of its fellow species which, like it, have the dark band on the tail ... General colour of upper surface rufous brown, graduating from brown anteriorly to bright rufous posteriorly. Head and nape brown, uniform on the forehead. Wings rufescent brown, median coverts edged with rufous; greater coverts blackish brown, forming a dark rectangular blotch on the wing; primaries broadly edged with pale rufous, in certain lights with rufescent grey; mantle and scapulars rufescent brown, the rufous tint predominant on the lower back. Upper tail coverts, bright rufous; middle tail feather rufous brown, the others dusky grey, permeated by the dark band of the under surface. Lores and cheeks subrufescent, the latter mottled with dark grey; ear coverts rufescent with pale shaft streaks. Palpebral streak dark in front, rufous in centre, pale posteriorly. Chin, throat, upper breast and flanks, pale rufous, passing into dusky white on the lower breast and abdomen; vent dusky brown; under tail coverts bright rufous; tail with a black transverse band, occupying the third quarter from the base; thighs and under wing-coverts pale rufous; bill, legs, and feet, dead straw colour. Total length 85 mm, culmen imperfect, wing, 50; tail, 42; tarsus, 21. Tail rounded, four stiff bristles at the gape. Locality Charleville. Collector, K. Broadbent.'

'There is but one example of this bird, and that of unknown sex. It is not at all unlikely that when it is better known, it will be referred to another genus.'

In the second edition of the RAOU Checklist (1926) and in Mathews (1930), *tyrannula* was listed as a distinct species, with the English name of Charleville Scrubwren. A.G. Campbell (1935), however, concluded from De Vis's description that it was no more than an immature of *Sericornis laevigaster* (now a synonym of *S. frontalis frontalis*, the nominate subspecies of the White-browed Scrubwren). Mayr (1937) disagreed with Campbell, concluding that the original description did not fit the young of '*laevigaster*' and furthermore that the alleged type-locality was in a dry belt where no *Sericornis* occurred. Subsequently, Mayr (1962) submitted a case to the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature to have *tyrannula* placed on the Index of Rejected Names, on the grounds that it was unidentifiable. In the following year the Commission (1963: 418-419), in its Opinion 684, suppressed *tyrannula* De Vis, 1905, 'as published in the binomen *Sericornis tyrannulus* [sic]',

for the purposes of the Law of Priority but not for those of the Law of Homonymy, and placed it on the Official Index of Rejected and Invalid Specific Names in Zoology, with the number 774.

Mayr's argument that no *Sericornis* could occur in so arid a locality as Charleville may or may not be valid; but certainly *S. frontalis* reaches a considerable distance into the Great Dividing Range at these latitudes, e.g. to the Carnarvon and Bigge ranges. However, his view that the description does not fit the young of '*laevigaster*' is correct, and Campbell was wrong in proposing such an equation. Whereas the immatures of *S. f. frontalis* are rufescent on the rump, they are not rufous or rufescent on the chin, throat, upper breast and flanks, having these regions washed with what Campbell described as 'snuff brown'. What disqualifies *tyrannula* as an immature *S. f. frontalis*, however, is De Vis's statement that the former shows in the tail 'a black transverse band, occupying the third quarter from the base'; in young *S. f. frontalis* there is no such band, the rectrices being more or less uniformly light greyish brown with slightly paler tips.

It is regrettable that *tyrannula* has been officially rejected as indeterminable, for in my opinion it is identifiable. De Vis's description accords in every respect with an immature Chestnut-rumped Hylacola *Sericornis pyrrhopygius*. In particular, the rufous wash of the chin, throat, upper breast, flanks and thighs, and the black subterminal tail-band are distinctive features of young *S. pyrrhopygius*, present neither in young *S. frontalis* nor, interestingly enough, in young of the Shy Hylacola, *S. cautus*. The rufous under-tailcoverts emphasized by De Vis are also a character of young *S. pyrrhopygius*; in young *S. frontalis* they are whitish washed lightly with cinnamon, and in young *S. cautus* they are dark chestnut.

With this identification in mind, I wrote to Mr D.P. Vernon, Ornithologist at the Queensland Museum, asking whether there was in that institution an immature *S. pyrrhopygius* that might possibly be the lost type of *tyrannula*. In a detailed and illuminating reply (*in litt.* 21 Jan. 1981), he stated that there was. This specimen, QM O.17905 (Pls 1-3), which I have examined on loan, was labelled by De Vis himself as *S. pyrrhopygius* and bears no other data. It is of a recently-fledged bird and agrees minutely with the original description save for some of the measurements. Its wing length is 50 mm agreeing with that given by De Vis. Its tarsus I measured

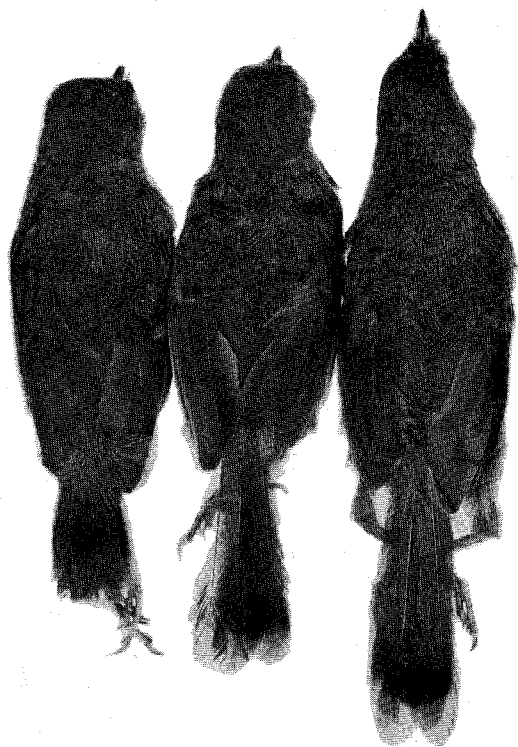


PLATE 1

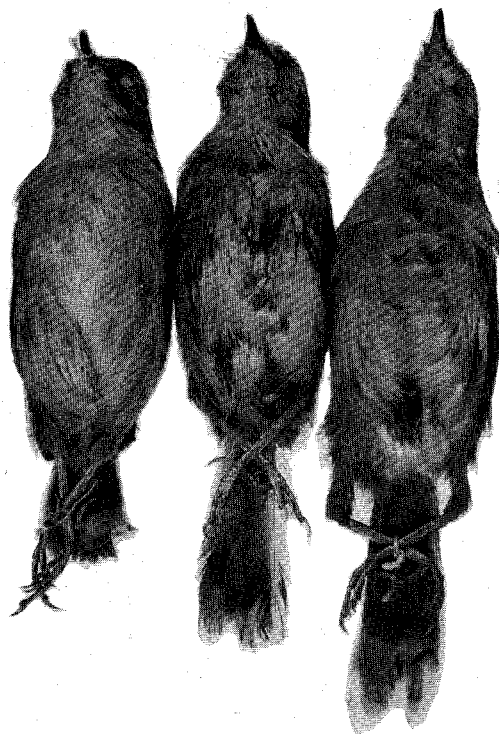


PLATE 2

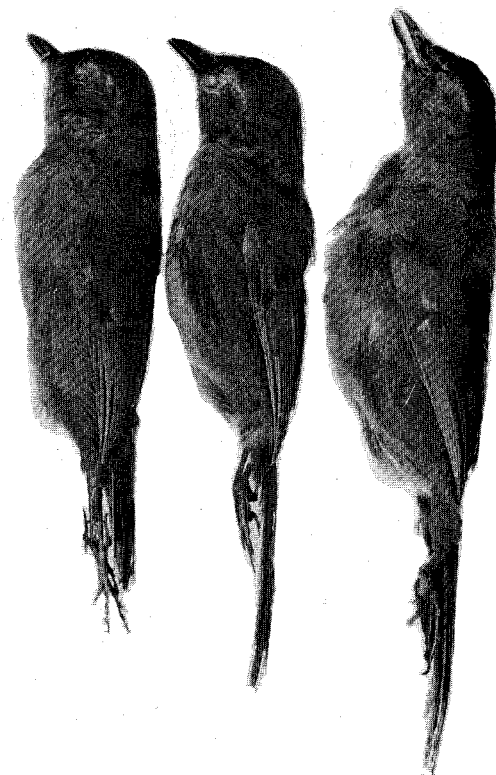


PLATE 3

Plates 1-3. Immatures of *Sericornis pyrrhopygius*, dorsal, ventral and lateral views. From left to right: AM O.15677, QM O.17905, AM O.17628. There is a possibility that QM O.17905 is the holotype of *Sericornis tyrannula* De Vis (see text).

as 19 mm, not seriously discrepant from De Vis's 21 mm. The length of its tail, however, differs markedly from that given by De Vis for *tyrannula*: 57.7 mm vs 42 mm. But De Vis did not state from which point he took this measurement, and in fact 42 mm corresponds in specimen QM O.17905 to the distance from the wingtips to the tip of the tail. The total length of the specimen also differs from De Vis's figure: 120 mm vs 85 mm. Yet a fledgling *S. pyrrhopygius* AM O.22852, with a total length of 86 mm has a barely emergent tail of only 25.8 mm, far less than the 42 mm of De Vis's allegedly 85 mm long specimen.

Thus, some of De Vis's measurements of *tyrannula*, or at least their published versions, may not be entirely reliable. His description of the culmen of *tyrannula* as 'imperfect', however seems to present a more serious impediment to the identification of specimen QM O.17905 as the holotype of *tyrannula*. 'Imperfect' has two chief meanings, 'damaged, flawed, not entire' and 'not fully formed.' The bill of QM O.17905 is undamaged (the culmen measuring 10.5 mm from the feathering and 12.6 mm from the base of the skull), which means that if De Vis was employing the term 'imperfect' in the first sense, then QM O.17905 cannot be the specimen he described as *tyrannula*. It is possible, however, that he was using the term in the sense 'not fully formed' with regard to its immaturity, but against this argument is the question as to why if the bill was entire, albeit not fully developed, did he not give the measurement for the culmen anyway?

As noted above, QM O.17905 was labelled *Hylacola pyrrhopygia* by De Vis himself. This in itself does not however, preclude its being the holotype of *tyrannula*. It is conceivable that De Vis on discovering the true identity of his new species, corrected the matter only on the specimen's label and not in print. Faced with similar embarrassment over the true identity of his *Microeca brunneicauda* ('Brown-tailed Flycatcher') A.J. Campbell at least corrected his error in print, yet so cryptically that his retraction passed unnoticed for 65 years (Parker 1973).

Given that the original description of *tyrannula* is of a recently fledged *S. pyrrhopygius*, then whether QM O.17905 can be regarded as De Vis's original specimen or not, the type-locality of Charleville is still clearly incorrect. For, in Queensland, *pyrrhopygia* is restricted to an area in the extreme south-eastern corner (Storr

1973). According to Vernon (*in litt.*), Broadbent collected within this area, at Maryland north-east of Stanthorpe between 3 December 1884 and 8 January 1885. From there he moved to the Darling Downs, thence to Chinchilla, thence to Charleville, collecting at the last-named in October 1885. During this busy time, Broadbent inadvertently mixed up his specimens from Maryland with those from Charleville (Vernon *in litt.*). There are thus excellent grounds for correcting the type-locality of *tyrannula* from Charleville to Maryland. Whether QM O.17905 may be regarded as the long-lost holotype of *tyrannula* seems largely a matter of how one interprets De Vis's remarks on the condition of the culmen of *tyrannula*.

For their invaluable assistance I should like to thank the following colleagues: Mr D.P. Vernon, Queensland Museum, for the loan of QM O.17905 and for information on Broadbent's movements in 1885; Mr W.E. Boles, Australian Museum (AM) for the loan of further immatures of *S. pyrrhopygius*; Mrs M.K. LeCroy, American Museum of Natural History, Dr G.F. Mees, Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, Leiden, and Dr G.M. Storr, Western Australian Museum for commenting on a draft version; and Mr R. Ruehle, South Australian Museum, for taking the photographs.

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18 April 1983