

## THE RUSTY-TAILED FLYEATER *GERYGONE RUFICAUDA* FORD & JOHNSTONE — A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

In August 1983, J.R. Ford and R.E. Johnstone (1983) described the Rusty-tailed Flyeater = *Gerygone Gerygone ruficauda* as a new species. It was based on three specimens, all taken before the turn of the century, and has not been seen since. Two of the specimens, both in the Australian Museum, Sydney, are labelled as having come from Wide Bay (AM 0.23356) and Rockingham Bay (AM 0.17290) on the east coast of Queensland. The third, American Museum of Natural History no. 606676, was cited as coming from an unknown locality in New Guinea through "a dealer named Rosenberg". If the source was in fact Baron C.B.H. von Rosenberg, its provenance was probably somewhere between the Vogelkop, its nearby islands, Jayapura and the Aru Islands in Irian Jaya. These were von Rosenberg's only land-falls on his journeys to New Guinea in 1858, 1860, 1864 and 1869-70 (van Steenis-Kruseman 1948-54).

Ford & Johnstone (1983) went on to assess the affinities of *G. ruficauda* and its course of speciation, correctly pointing out that it was a member of the New Guinean *chrysogaster*-group (Yellow-flanked *Gerygone*). The *chrysogaster*-group stands apart from other elements of *Gerygone* in its plain unbanded tail, thick *magnirostris*-like bill, full white supra-oral stripe and flesh-brown, not black legs; the last trait has not been stressed before. The only other species to be linked with the group has been the Melanesian *Gerygone G. flavolateralis* of New Caledonia and the New Hebrides (Ford 1981). However, as pointed out by Schodde (1982, appendix 21) and since corroborated by Ford & Johnstone (1983), *flavolateralis* is a member of the *G. fusca-igata* (Grey *Gerygone*) assemblage.

I have now examined the two specimens of *Gerygone ruficauda* from the Australian Museum, including the holotype (AM 0.17290). They resemble New Guinean *G. chrysogaster* particularly closely, differing only in their whitish (not lemon) flanks, flat brown (not olive-brown) dorsa, and clearer (not greenish) russet toning to the upper tail coverts and tail. More than that, they are, allowing for soiling, *indistinguishable* from skins of nominate *chrysogaster* prepared from spirit-preserved carcasses in the Australian National Wildlife Collection, Canberra, e.g. ANWC 2765, from the Sepik province. Experience with other acanthizids and silvereyes *Zosterops* (ANWC 17222, 17223) in the Australian National Wildlife Collection suggests that most of the lipochromes conferring yellow and green tones to feathers are selectively bleached out or dissolved by ethanol within nine months immersion. In the case of *Gerygone chrysogaster*, belly and flanks are left white,

the back and shoulders turn flat brown, and the upper tail coverts become sharper russet. Subsequent exposure to daylight, suffered by many pre-1900 bird skins in the Australian Museum, the exacerbate may effect.

There is some evidence for believing that the two specimens of *ruficauda* in the Australian Museum were prepared from spirit, even though their labels have not been so annotated. Internally, there is no positive evidence of preparation out of one of the alcohols or "spirits of wine" as ethanol was commonly known in the 19th century. Nor should there be because, according to advice from the Forensic Section of the Australian Commonwealth Police Force, residues of such volatile compounds should have evaporated long since. Externally, however, the two specimens have the tight form of skins hardened and made less pliable by alcohol. The belly of the specimen reputedly from Wide Bay, moreover, still bears traces of a yellowish bloom that is missing altogether from the other. In the latter, furthermore, its wool-plugged eye-sockets are partly covered by the nictitating membrane, an organ easily cut off or pushed out of sight in fresh-skinned specimens but which contracts and becomes difficult to remove or press away after embalment. Then there is the probability, to quote Ford & Johnstone (l.c.), that the specimens were prepared by the same person, even though they were apparently taken by different collectors at different stations in different years. For this to happen in the days before refrigerators, the carcasses would have first had to have been embalmed, and then despatched to preparators at the Australian Museum to be skinned at some time later, perhaps by J.A. Thorpe, R. Grant or even E.P. Ramsay. Either that or the two *Gerygones* were taken by the same collector at the same place, prepared together, and later mislabelled (see below).

If the specimens are of *Gerygone chrysogaster*, as now seems likely, do they vouch for the occurrence of that species in Australia? I am doubtful. In New Guinea, *Gerygone chrysogaster* is a readily seen foliage-gleaner of the mid-stage of lower altitude rainforests and sings repetitively throughout the year (e.g. Diamond 1972). Zoogeographically, it would be expected to occur in Australia first and foremost in the rainforests of Cape York Peninsula (Schodde & Calaby 1972). Yet it has never been found there, not even by such thorough field collectors as W. McLennan, A.S. Meek and R. Kemp. Its niche in the restricted coastal rainforests of north-east Australia may well be preoccupied by *Sericornis beccarii*/*S. magnirostris*, *Gerygone palpebrosa* and *G. magnirostris* (Little/Large-billed Scrubwrens,

Black-throated and Large-billed *Gerygones*) in combination.

Rather, I suspect mislabelling and misappropriation of details on the two skins, particularly if they were prepared from spirit and had their field tags removed in the process. The system of cataloguing bird specimens in the Asutralian Museum around the turn of the century and on into the early 1900s left the records untrustworthy. In many cases, original labels were discarded, abridged details were copied into a register, and from it new labels were made out, often much later. Staff taxidermist Robert Grant even wrote labels on his own collections from memory, over the period 1885-1917.

In the case of the two *Gerygones*, the specimen supposedly from Wide Bay has already been quoted as of "uncertain locality" by Ford & Johnstone (1983). In fact, its locality is fictitious, for it is registered without locality, its labelled provenance of "Wide Bay" having been transposed from the preceding specimen in the register (W.E. Boles and N.W. Longmore, pers. comm.). Only the other *Gerygone*, the type, bears what appears to be an original label; it carries the details "shot 13 Mile River 12/10/85", plus the number 457 which refers to the number for *Gerygone magnirostris* in the RAOU Checklist (1926), and several other untraced numbers - 910 or 016, A.2 - nothing more. A later secondary label gives "Rockingham Bay, New South Wales Government" but without evidence of any connection with Thirteen Mile River. Reference to the government on the secondary label, furthermore, has been crossed out and replaced with the annotation "ex Dobroyde Collection", W. Longmore (pers. comm.) having found that it came from there. This was E.P. Ramsay's private collection which is known for the unreliability of its data (J.H. Calaby, pers. comm.). Thus Thirteen Mile river, which is not in the Australia 1:250,000 Map Series Gazetteer for north Queensland (Division of National Mapping 1975), could be a local name from anywhere, even from around Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea whence Andrew Goldie, Carl Hunstein, Reverend W.G. Lawes and others sent specimens to Ramsay or had them purchased through his agency during the late 1870s and 1880s (W.E. Boles, pers. comm.). Ford & Johnstone (l.c.) suggest that Kendall Broadbent may have taken the specimen. If so, the collection date of October 1885 does not fit, for Broadbent was then working for the

Queensland Museum, and possibly out of Brisbane on the Darling Downs (cf. Whittell 1954). In any case, the pencil "field" writing on its original label is not in Broadbent's hand (W.E. Boles, pers. comm.).

In these circumstances, "*Gerygone ruficauda*" and its zoogeographical correlations should be held in abeyance, pending more substantial proof of their existence.

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