

SHORT NOTE

A previously un-noticed record of the grey warbler (*Gerygone igata*) by R.-P. Lesson in the Bay of Islands, April 1824

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The grey warbler (*Gerygone igata*) is New Zealand's most widely distributed endemic taxon; it is found on the 3 main islands and many offshore islands (Robertson *et al.* 2007). It is long believed to have been first discovered for science by Dumont d'Urville's *Astrolabe* expedition (Oliver 1955; Watola 2008). Oliver states: "*Though the Grey Warbler is abundant in all parts of New Zealand, it was not collected until the visit of the French zoologists Quoy and Gaimard in the Astrolabe in 1827. These naturalists collected their specimens at Tasman Bay and described the species under the name Curruca igata, the specific designation being the corruption of the reply given by the Maori when questioned as to its native name*". Quoy and Gaimard first began publishing results of the *Astrolabe* voyage in 1830, though the section on mammals and birds was not published until 1832 (Mlíkovský 2012). The 'fauvette' or warbler is described in the *Zoologie* volume, p. 201 (Quoy & Gaimard 1830) and is illustrated in the *Atlas*, pl. 11 fig. 2 (Dumont d'Urville 1833).

It is surprising that the ubiquitous grey warbler was not recorded by any of Cook's naturalists (see

Medway 1976a & b; Bartle 1993). I speculate that because of its small size and cryptic colouring it may have been 'lost' among the many other more visible passerines then abundant on the New Zealand mainland. The failure of Cook's naturalists to note the grey warbler raises questions about the grey warbler's abundance at the time and possible competitive exclusion by other species which have now disappeared.

In April 1824 the French naval corvette *La Coquille*, under the command of Louis Isidore Duperrey, called at the Bay of Islands on a round-the-world voyage of exploration and scientific research. The 2 officers responsible for natural history were the first lieutenant Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville (botany and entomology) and medical officer René-Primevère Lesson (zoology) (Fig. 1; Cretella 2010). Lesson's fellow medical officer and ornithologist Prosper Garnot had left the ship in Sydney the previous month because of illness.

During the 2 week (3-17 April 1824) visit to the Bay of Islands, Lesson recorded a number of New Zealand bird species – many for the first time. As with all the French voyages of exploration, the scientific findings were published in several



Fig. 1. Portrait of René-Primevère Lesson, reproduced courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library.

volumes that included atlases of coloured engraved illustrations. The *Atlas – histoire naturelle, Zoologie (mammifères et oiseaux)* (Duperrey 1826), along with 2 *Zoologie* volumes of text, were published in a series of *livraisons* from 1826 to 1830. Of the 60 birds illustrated on 44 of the *Atlas*' 53 plates, 4 are from New Zealand: North Island tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala toitoi*), North Island robin (*Petroica longipes*), bellbird (*Anthornis melanura melanura*) and North Island saddleback (*Philesturnus rufusater*). Other new forest birds described and named by Lesson and Garnot in the *Zoologie* volume 1, part 2, (Duperrey 1828) were the whitehead (*Mohoua albicilla*) and the New Zealand kingfisher (*Todiramphus sanctus vagans*).

In the same volume, Chapter 5 '*Observations générales ornithologiques*' (p. 417), Lesson also provided an unmistakable description of the grey warbler, with a phonetic approximation of its Māori name '*didadido*' [riroriro]. The relevant *livraison* (10) was published in 1829 (Cretella 2010). Lesson's description is as follows: '*Un pouillot, nommé didadido, de la taille roitelet, est vert olive clair sur les ailes, dont les pennes sont brunes; la gorge est grisâtre pâle, le ventre blanc.*' [A warbler, named *didadido*, the size of a wren, is light olive green on the wings,

feathers of which are brown, the throat is pale grey, the belly white]. It is the use of this word '*didadido*' within the French text that I consider the most likely reason why this passage has gone un-noticed until now. Interestingly, '*Diro riro; a certain bird*' is listed in Kendall & Lee (1820).

Lesson's account of the grey warbler comes immediately after a short description of what he referred to as the '*peculiar finch with the gauze tail*' for which he provided the Māori name '*matata*' (easily identifiable as the North Island fernbird (*Bowdleria punctata vealeae*)). The fernbird (South Island subspecies) was also collected in Tasman Bay in 1827 by Quoy and Gaimard who formally described and named it as *Synallaxis punctata*. Quoy & Gaimard (1830) is therefore the authority for the species. Lesson also provided a short description of the North Island fantail, '*the flycatcher pi-oua-ka-oua-ka [piwakawaka]*' (Lesson was careful to record Māori names acknowledging original Māori discovery).

Despite Lesson's descriptions in Chapter 5, the grey warbler, fernbird and fantail were not formally named or listed by Garnot in Chapter 7, '*Quelques espèces nouvelles*', or by Lesson in Chapter 8, '*Catalogues des oiseaux recueillis...*'. Neither were they named in the *Atlas*, nor does Lesson refer to them in his *Manuel d'Ornithologie* (1828) or *Traité d'Ornithologie* (1831).

The failure of Lesson and Garnot to propose scientific names for these birds might be partly explained by Lesson's assumption that many of the New Zealand birds he encountered had already been recorded. As Lesson wrote in Chapter 5 (p.415) [English translation M.L.]: '*The ornithology of the North Island of New Zealand is strongly interesting and must provide future discoveries for travellers who are able to stay there longer than we did. For the most part, these species have been described by Latham in the supplement to his General Synopsis and in his Index. We will confine ourselves to citing those that we have encountered and upon which we are able to add some detailed descriptions.*'

Lesson and Garnot's oversight might also be explained by their preoccupation with the sheer mass of biological material the expedition had collected, most of which was donated to the *Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle* (MNHN) in Paris. This included some 2,000 zoological specimens including 264 species of birds and mammals, 63 reptiles and 288 fishes (of which more than 80 species were new to science). There were also 1,200 insects comprising 1,100 species (including 450 new species), 3,000 botanic specimens (400 of them new) and a mineral collection of 330 samples (De Laguerenne & Kérneis 1988; Dunmore 2007). Alternatively, specimens of the birds in question were not collected, or more likely misplaced.

Despite his assumption that most of the New Zealand bird species had already been described by Latham in his *General Synopsis of Birds* based on the work of Cook's naturalists, Lesson and Garnot were to describe and name a significant number of New Zealand birds previously unknown to science, several of which were in a few short years to become locally extinct. The name 'Lesson' or Latinised derivatives appear 172 times in the *Checklist of NZ Birds* (Gill *et al.* 2010). The achievement of Lesson in particular, given the very short time he had in New Zealand, was impressive and more significant than generally appreciated at the time, even by himself.

As Andrews (1986) commented: 'more than half the birds brought back from New Zealand [by the Coquille voyage] were new, but only a portion of them was recognised as such by the authors [of the expedition reports]'. The mainly southern hemisphere birds described and named by Lesson and Garnot covered 83 taxa, involving 94 names. Fifty-nine of those names are currently considered valid for recognised species and sub-species (Dickinson *et al.* 2015). The grey warbler, the North Island fantail and the North Island fernbird could well have been added to this list had Lesson got round to naming them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Dr Brian Gill and Dr Alice Cibois, Muséum d'histoire naturelle Geneva (MHNG), for reviewing the manuscript and 2 un-named reviewers for their helpful suggested improvements.

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Keywords René-Primevère Lesson; grey warbler; *Gerygone igata*; North Island fernbird; *Bowdleria punctata vealeae*; North Island fantail; *Rhipidura fuliginosa placabilis*; *La Coquille*