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The composition of the syntype series of *Pitta gurneyi* Hume, 1875, and the publication timing of the associated plate

by Robert P. Prŷs-Jones & Clive A. Slater

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Summary.—The claims of an array of specimens to be considered part of the type series of *Pitta gurneyi* are clarified. The plate of *P. gurneyi* that is commonly linked to the type description in *Stray Feathers* was based on two specimens Hume gave to Gurney and was published considerably after the type description itself.

Pitta gurneyi was described by A. O. Hume (1875a) in issue no. 4, dated May 1875, of vol. 3 of *Stray Feathers,* from specimens recently collected by his curator, W. Davison, in southern Burma. Subsequently, in the mid 1880s, Hume donated his enormous bird collection to the then British Museum (Natural History), now the Natural History Museum (NHMUK). Shortly thereafter, Sclater (1888) produced vol. 14, which included pittas, of the museum's 27-volume catalogue of its holdings. In this he considered to be a type every *P. gurneyi* specimen, approaching 40 in all, received by the museum directly from Hume. This was obviously incorrect, as many were collected as late as 1877, well after the type description was published.

Approaching a century later, in their catalogue of the passerine bird types held by NHMUK, Warren & Harrison (1971: 225) wrote regarding *Pitta gurneyi*: 'Syntype, Adult male (relaxed mount). Reg. no. 1955.6.N.17.444. Tenasserim Province, Burma. Collected by W. Davison. Presented by the Norwich Castle Museum, having been received from J. H. Gurney. This specimen is labelled as the type. There are several other syntypes in the collection.' In her unpublished working notes for this volume, Warren (ms, held at NHMUK, Tring) elaborated on the published account by stating: 'A number of skins collected in 1875 could be co-types, but this presented by J. H. Gurney to the Norwich Castle Mus. being labelled type is selected.' Selecting only one syntype for a taxon on which to present full data was Warren & Harrison's *modus operandi*; in the introduction to her previous work on the non-passerine types, Warren (1966) had made it clear that this method of proceeding was in no way intended to be construed as the designation of a lectotype.

In 2004, a subsequent NHMUK curator, Michael Walters, annotated the reference volume of Warren & Harrison (1971) held alongside the NHMUK bird type collection as follows: 'The specimens regarded as the co-types by Warren & Harrison (1955.6.N.17.444–445) are most unlikely to be so. They are without locality information, and there is nothing to link them to either Davison or Hume. They were presented by Gurney as the types, but this is obviously unprovable.' In this context, NHMUK 1955.6.N.17.445 is the supposed Gurney female syntype, about which Warren & Harrison (1971) had not commented. The diametric disagreement of these two viewpoints suggested that it would be worth revisiting the whole issue of supposed syntype status for the name *Pitta gurneyi*. The first nine specimens in Table 1 comprise those currently (2021) held as syntypes by NHMUK and the remaining four are other NHMUK specimens with claims that deserve consideration.

In his type description, Hume (1875a: 296) referred to the species' discovery as '… one of the results of the systematic ornithological survey of the Tenasserim Provinces which

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TABLE 1

Details of candidate *Pitta gurneyi* syntypes held at the Natural History Museum, Tring. Original labels all written by Davison, but species name was added by Hume. 'Malewoon D.' appears to refer to Malewoon District. Conclusions of this paper regarding type status appear in **bold**.

1. NHMUK 1887.5.1.333. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Female. 22/2/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
2. NHMUK 1887.5.1.334. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Male. 28/2/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
3. NHMUK 1887.5.1.335. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Male. 24/2/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
4. NHMUK 1887.5.1.336. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Male. 7/3/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
5. NHMUK 1887.5.1.337. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Female. 10/3/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
6. NHMUK 1887.5.1.338. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Female. 5/3/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
7. NHMUK 1887.5.1.340. Orig. label: *Brachyurus gurneyi* Male. 8/4/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **No type status**
8. NHMUK 1887.5.1.342. Orig. label: *Brachyurus gurneyi* Female. 26/4/75. Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **No type status**
9. NHMUK 1887.5.1.367. Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Female. 9/4/75. Palaw ton ton, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **No type status**
10. NHMUK 1955.6.N.17.444 (ex Gurney/Norwich Castle Museum collections). Ex-mount. No orig. label, just Norwich Castle Mus.[?] display label stating 'PITTA GURNEYI (Type Specimens) Male (& Female). Adult. Burma. Presented by Mr. J.H. Gurney'. **Possible syntype**
11. NHMUK 1955.6.N.17.445 (ex Gurney/Norwich Castle Museum collections). Ex-mount. Female. No orig. label. [Also, not even the NCM label that the male (10 above) has.] **Possible syntype**
12. NHMUK 1881.5.1.4649 (ex Gould collection). Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Male. 28/3/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**
13. NHMUK 1881.5.1.4648 (ex Gould collection). Orig. label: *Pitta gurneyi* Female. 8/3/75. Bankasoon, Malewoon D., Tenasserim Pr., B. Burma. **Syntype**

for the past two years has been vigorously prosecuted by my curator Mr. William Davison and my whole staff.' He further mentioned that it is '… an inhabitant of the most southern portions of the Tenasserim Provinces …' and dedicated it to '… my kind friend Mr. J. H. Gurney …'. It is clear from the description provided that he had more than one specimen of both male and female in front of him, but unclear exactly how many of each. A colour illustration of a bird of each sex by the artist 'W.H.' (= William Hart; Jackson 1987, 1999), on which the species' name is perhaps surprisingly given as '*Brachyurus gurneyi*, Hume', accompanies the text in the bound volumes of *Stray Feathers* 3 that we have examined, but no reference to the plate is made in the article itself. *Brachyurus* was a generic name commonly used for an array of pitta species at the time (*cf.* Elliot 1870).

Brachyurus gurneyi is also the name that Hume himself used both on the labels of two specimens taken in April 1875 (Table 1) and in a subsequent paper, entitled 'A second list of the birds of Tenasserim', which appeared in the same issue of *Stray Feathers* as the type description (Hume 1875b). Hume (1875b: 317) further indicated that this paper was based on specimens, numbers again not stated, secured by his staff 'From November last year [1874] to the end of March [1875]', following their move from the northern to the southern portion of the Tenasserim provinces. In the genus and species indices to vol. 3 of *Stray*

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Feathers, which must have been produced around the same time (2 December 1875) as the overall preface to the complete volume (Hume 1875c), only the name *Pitta gurneyi* is mentioned, and this seems to have been the generic affiliation for it that Hume favoured other than for a restricted period around mid-1875.

The consolidated major monograph on the birds of Tenasserim subsequently produced by Hume & Davison (1878) provides little further insight. They considered the species to be a non-breeding seasonal visitor to southernmost Tenasserim, first appearing around 10 February, becoming commoner in April and May, and then disappearing entirely in June and July as the monsoon rains set in. Nothing is stated regarding numbers collected and dates of collection.

Given the statement that Hume (1875b) made regarding the time period over which specimens considered in that paper had been collected, it appears highly improbable that his type description earlier in the same issue would have been based on specimens taken later than March 1875. Supporting this, given that the issue is dated May 1875, which is accepted as the true date of publication (Pittie 2006, Dickinson *et al*. 2011), and that Hume presumably wrote his type description at his home in Simla, north-west India, whereas Davison was collecting in southern Burma, the logistics alone make it unlikely that he would have had later specimens to hand. Of the first nine specimens in Table 1, it therefore appears that claims to syntype status for 7–9, all taken in April 1875, should be considered very doubtful. However, conversely, two previously unconsidered Davison specimens (Table 1, 12–13), both taken in March 1875, that reached NHMUK via the Gould bequest of 1881, do possess strong claims to be considered syntypes. These were a gift from Hume to Gould, made at some point prior to April 1877, when the account of *Pitta gurneyi* in vol. 5 by Gould (1850–83), which mentions them, appeared.

By inference, it would appear that Gurney considered that his male and female specimens (Table 1, 10–11) were types, given that this is how they were referred to by Norwich Castle Museum when displayed there. As noted above, the display label still attached to the male was seemingly the key point influencing its choice as the selected type by Warren & Harrison (1971). Unfortunately, however, the collector's labels, which were presumably once attached to both, are missing, probably removed when the specimens were mounted, and there is now no indication in any available surviving documentation as to when they were collected or by whom. However, a letter dated 27 July 1875 that Hume sent from Simla to Gurney (Barclays Group Archive: 1248-0322) sheds considerable light on the situation and seems worth quoting in full:

> 'My dear Gurney, I send you by overland parcil [*sic*] post a pair (male & female) of the lovely ground thrush which I named after you in the May number of Stray Feathers – I hope you will accept these –
>
> I should also feel much obliged if you would let Sharpe,[*sic*] have these for a few days to figure for me, as also if you would not permit anyone else to figure them until my figure of them in Stray Feathers appears – pray excuse a hurried note. I was anxious to send you these long ago but I have been so ill that I have not been able to do my work much less attend to Birds
>
> I hope it was not a liberty naming these birds after you without your permission but if so you must pardon it, as it simply was a tribute to your worth as an ornithologist, & an acknowledgement of the kindness I have on all occasions met with from you'

This letter proves that Gurney's specimens were received from Hume and therefore collected by Davison. Moreover, Hume's comment that he had been anxious, but for

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illness, to send them 'long ago' suggests, but does not prove, that they were two of the type series he had available when he described *Pitta gurneyi*. However, it also reveals a further important insight. In his preface to vol. 3 of *Stray Feathers*, Hume (1875c) emphasised his frustration with trying to get plates of adequate quality done in India to illustrate articles on new and poorly known species, having previously written damningly about one he had had to use to illustrate a species in the January issue of the same year (Hume 1875d). His letter above makes it clear that it was Gurney's specimens, only sent to England in July 1875, that were to be sent to Sharpe, who would get them figured for him; either by prior agreement or Sharpe's decision, it was then Hart, based in London, who undertook the illustration.

This all helps make sense of an otherwise troubling logistical conundrum. The collection dates of the earliest three extant specimens (Table 1) are late February 1875, and from Davison & Hume (1878) it appears none could have been collected before 10 February. Assuming that the publication date of *Stray Feathers* 3, issue 4, really was May 1875 as stated, to have included the plate with this issue would have entailed an extraordinarily rapid progression of specimens from Davison in southern Burma to Hume in north-west India, on from Hume to Hart in England, followed by painting by Hart and despatch of the finished artwork back to Hume in India. Instead, it would appear that the plate was probably sent to *Stray Feathers* readers with issue 5 in November 1875, explaining why no reference to it is made in Hume (1875a). The contents list for the volume, probably sent out in December with the last issue (6) for the year, references the plate alongside the paper to which it relates, showing that it must have been produced by then.

In conclusion, we suggest that, of the NHMUK specimens listed in Table 1, only the eight comprising 1–6 and 12–13 are certainly syntypes of the name *Pitta gurneyi*. Specimens 7–9 do not appear to be, and the jury must remain out on specimens 10–11 pending possible discovery of further information as to the dates on which they were collected. The fact that the plate by Hart was clearly based on the specimens Hume sent to Gurney does not in itself confer type status on them, as we have demonstrated that the plate was published later than the type description. It is entirely possible that additional potential syntypes could exist among specimens that Hume may have sent to other colleagues and which may now be held in institutions elsewhere (for a helpful list of known holdings, see Collar *et al*. 1986).

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