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The provenance of an exceptionally early specimen of Cape Verde Barn Owl *Tyto alba detorta* E. Hartert, 1913

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In the account for *Strix flammea*, i.e. modern *Tyto alba*, in his exhaustive catalogue of the owl specimens then held in the British Museum (BM) and now in the Natural History Museum (NHMUK), Sharpe (1875: 300) listed specimen *p'* as 'Male ad. sk. Porto Praya, Santiago, Cape-Verd Islands, Jan 25, 1822. Charles Darwin, Esq. [C.].' Something is clearly wrong here, as Charles Darwin would have been less than 13 years old at the time and certainly not yet collecting in the Cape Verde Islands!

The most obvious possibility of error is that the year could actually have been 1832, not 1822: Charles Darwin did indeed visit the Cape Verde Islands twice during his voyage on H.M.S. *Beagle*, on the first occasion arriving on 16 January 1832 and staying for 21 days, i.e. including 25 January 1832. However, there is no evidence that Darwin did collect such a specimen, which is not mentioned by Gould & Darwin (1838–41), and Steinheimer (2004) did not include it in the comprehensive appendix to his Darwin bird specimen paper. Moreover, the specimen survives (Fig. 1) and what is clearly its original label reads merely 'Strix male Port Praya Jan. 25. 1822', i.e. the date is unambiguously 1822, but there is no mention of a collector (Fig. 2). Moreover, the label is totally unlike those of Darwin, who used a twist of paper with merely a number on it that cross-referenced data he recorded in his notebook (Steinheimer 2004).

This all tends to indicate that Sharpe's ascription of the specimen to Darwin was incorrect. Another suggestion was later made by Hazevoet (1995: 75) who, in mentioning a few early Cape Verde specimens with uncertain collector(s) in NHMUK, commented



Figure 1. The early Barn Owl *Tyto alba detorta* specimen from Santiago, Cape Verde Islands (Hein van Grouw, © Natural History Museum, London)

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Figure 2. Detail of seemingly original label from the early *Tyto alba detorta* specimen from Santiago, Cape Verde Islands (Hein van Grouw, © Natural History Museum, London)

that 'The oldest of these is a male *Tyto detorta* collected at Praia, Santiago, 25 January 1822, presumably by the French *Coquille* expedition.' However, the *Coquille* expedition, commanded by L.-I. Duperrey, did not sail from Toulon in France until August 1822 (Duperrey 1826), so this again appears improbable.

In an attempt to disentangle this conundrum, I used an approach that started from the locality information given on the specimen label (Fig. 2). Many (somewhat more than 6,000), but by no means all, bird specimens that had both arrived in the BM bird skin collection before the mid 1830s and were still extant were included in the 44 volumes of the manuscript 'Vellum Catalogues' (Thomas 2012). These were begun around the middle of 1835 and continued to receive at least some entries until 1843, when curatorial attention switched to producing published catalogues. Although many specimens therein are incompletely identified, often with just an archaic generic name, and the catalogues were never comprehensive, they remain an extremely valuable early source of information.

The *Tyto alba* specimen under consideration is unfortunately not included in the Vellum Catalogues and, for unclear reasons, neither does it appear in the subsequent relevant published catalogues by Gray (1844, 1848). However, my search of the Vellum Catalogues for the locality 'Port(o) Praya' did yield two other specimens, both donated by Captain Sabine, undated and recorded merely as *Fringilla* (Vell. Cat. 19: 113a,b). These specimens proved to be examples of the endemic Cape Verde Sparrow *Passer iagoensis*, which both unfortunately lack original labels, each having only a late 19th-century BM one (Fig. 3). They were listed by Sharpe (1888: 324) as specimens *g* and *h*, both with the data 'Male ad. sk. Cape Verde Islands Sir E. Sabine [P.]'. The species was first described only in 1838, by Gould, based on a specimen collected in Cape Verde in January 1832 by Darwin.

A further search in the Vellum Catalogues for 'Sabine' turned up an array of other early specimens from West Africa donated by Capt. Edward Sabine, with a few localised to Sierra Leone, but no more listed as from the Cape Verdes. This ties in with a comment made by Sharpe (1906: 460) to the effect that 'Sir Edward Sabine gave many [bird] specimens from West Africa in the early part of the nineteenth century, but no register of the donations appears to have been kept.' The latter indeed appears to be the case, as my search of the Book of Presents, which recorded specimen donations to the BM (see Thomas 2012), failed to find his name mentioned. Exactly when in the early 19th century Sabine's material

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Figure 3. Two Cape Verde Sparrow *Passer iagoensis* specimens collected by Edward Sabine in January 1822 on Santiago, Cape Verde Islands. Note that neither has an original label, but only a BM one dating from the late 1800s, and that '117b' on one of them is an error for '113b', its correct Vellum Catalogue number (Hein van Grouw, © Natural History Museum, London)

arrived in the museum therefore is unclear, although it was almost certainly prior to 1837, when modern registration of incoming specimens commenced (Thomas 2012).

Captain (later Sir) Edward Sabine (1788–1883) was an army officer (Royal Artillery) and physicist, who was assigned to serve as astronomer on John Ross's search for the North-West passage in 1818 and sailed to the Arctic again with William Edward Parry in 1819–20, conducting magnetic observations (Good 2011). He took a considerable interest in wider natural history, including ornithology, to which he had been introduced by his older brother Joseph Sabine, for example publishing on Greenland birds following his return from his first Arctic trip (Sabine 1819). On 17 November 1821, he joined H.M.S. *Iphigenia* in Portsmouth bound for West Africa, although the ship did not finally depart Britain until 4 January 1822, was approaching Cape Verde on 23 January (Rennell 1832: 284), and finally arrived in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on 18 February 1822. Here Sabine remained until 18 April 1822, when he embarked on H.M.S. *Pheasant* for a programme of geodesical studies in the tropical seas between Africa and the Americas, finally arriving in Britain on 2 February 1823 (Challenger 1973).

Edward Sabine was asked by Joseph Sabine, then Secretary of the Horticultural Society, to enlist a plant collector, George Don, to make botanical collections for the society in West Africa, South America and the West Indies during his voyage (Challenger 1973). Don most helpfully kept a detailed journal of the trip, now held in five volumes by the Lindley Library, Royal Horticultural Society, London. Vol. 1 (RHS/Col/2/1/1) records that the Atlantic island ports of call by H.M.S. *Iphigenia* en route to West Africa comprised Madeira, Tenerife and the Cape Verdes, with the ship coming in sight of the latter on 24 January, anchoring at 'Porto Prayii, St. Jago' on 26 January and sailing again for West Africa on 28 January (Don ms.). In his entry for 26 January, Don noted that he, Edward Sabine and John Smith, Sabine's assistant, landed, and that John Smith was shooting birds, specifically

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including 'a curious owl'. He further noted that on 27 January 'this day Captain Sabine had several birds brought to him by the officers, among which was a very strange kingfisher'.

In conclusion, there is therefore no reasonable doubt that the *Tyto alba detorta* specimen under consideration was collected on Santiago, Cape Verdes, by John Smith, on behalf of Edward Sabine, in January 1822, although Don (ms.) indicated this occurred on 26 January rather than the 25 January noted on the label (Fig. 1). During his two days on Santiago, Sabine clearly also acquired several other bird specimens, although only the two *Passer iagoensis* can be documented to have reached the BM. The kingfisher was undoubtedly Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala*, a common resident on Santiago (Hazevoet 1995). This early collecting visit was not noted by Hazevoet (1995) in his chapter on History of Ornithological Exploration on the Cape Verdes, and seems to have escaped the attention of ornithologists until now.

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