

## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

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# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

### FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

See also BOC website: <http://www.boc-online.org>

The next meeting (21 March) will be held online only via Zoom. Although free, you need to pre-register your intention to attend (<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-importation-of-the-plumage-prohibition-act-of-1921-tickets-256779342927>). The 16 May meeting will be held in person and be available to watch online. For more details, keep an eye on the Club's website (<https://www.boc-online.org/meetings>) or Twitter account ([https://twitter.com/online\\_BOC](https://twitter.com/online_BOC)).

**Monday 21 March 2022 – 6.30 pm – Kathryn Rooke** – *The Importation of the Plumage (Prohibition) Act of 1921, as told through the Natural History Museums Archive collections.*

**Abstract:** In the Victorian and Edwardian period, a demand for bird feathers in fashionable millinery led to the most luxurious of plumes being worth, quite literally, their weight in diamonds. Demand for feathers of egrets, birds of paradise, hummingbirds, grebes and more were pushing bird populations across the world to the brink of extinction. In this talk, I share records from the Natural History Museums archives that document the museums contribution to a lengthy campaign, led by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, to end the importation of bird feathers from across the then British Empire, which eventually resulted in the passing of the Importation of Plumage (Prohibition) Act in 1921.

**Biography:** Kathryn Rooke is the Assistant Archivist at the Natural History Museum, London, and Archivist at the former Rothschild property, now local history museum, Gunnersbury Park. She is a history graduate and Archives and Records Management post-graduate who has previously worked for Lancashire Archives, The Clothworkers Company, The Barber-Surgeons' Company and The School for Oriental and African Studies. After a brief three-year stint in Taiwan, she is now London-based with her family, and enjoying the opportunities NHMUK has brought to revisit a childhood of birdwatching and bug-collecting.

**Monday 16 May 2022 – 6.30 pm – Martin Stervander** – *The evolutionary history of a remarkable radiation of South Atlantic finches.*

This meeting will be held in person in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2EE, but will also be available to watch via Zoom. Details concerning registration should be available shortly. Please follow the Club on Twitter (@online\_BOC) to keep abreast.

**Abstract:** Ask anyone interested in birds for an example of adaptive radiations, and they will probably mention Darwin's Finches, the evolutionary 'rock stars' of the Galápagos Islands. But did you know about *Nesospiza* finches, endemic to Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic? Tristan is a small and very isolated archipelago comprising three main islands, the two smaller of which are each home to both a small-bodied and small-billed generalist finch, and a large-bodied and large-billed specialist finch that feeds exclusively on the seeds of an endemic island tree. But how are these four taxa related, and how did they evolve? And where do the extinct small-billed finches of the third, larger island fit into the picture? I will take you on a trip to the South Atlantic, to see what ecology and a whole lot of DNA detective work can reveal about this remarkable radiation.

**Biography:** Martin Stervander is a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow at the Natural History Museum, Tring, where he currently is researching the genomic architecture of convergent evolution in flight loss among island rails (including the Inaccessible Island Rail *Laterallus [Atlantisia] rogersi*, neighbour to the *Nesospiza* finches). Martin did his Ph.D. on speciation in birds at Lund Univ. (Sweden), followed by a postdoc at the Univ. of Oregon (USA). While his main research is focused on understanding the evolutionary mechanisms

of speciation and radiation as well as phenotypic convergence, his interests also comprise phylogenetics, taxonomy, and phylogeography. Martin is an Associate Editor of *Ibis* and Managing Editor of BirdLife Sweden's ornithological journal *Ornis Svecica*, which—like *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club*—is available online, at <https://os.birdlife.se>.

### BOOK REVIEWS

Milsom, T. 2020. *Henry Seebohm's ornithology: his collecting, field observations, publications and evolutionary theories*. Self-published in a limited edition of 125 copies. 371 pp, 16 colour and 35 black-and-white illustrations. £40 (via Wildside Books, Eastbourne, e-mail: [wildsidebooks@hotmail.com](mailto:wildsidebooks@hotmail.com)).

Henry Seebohm (1832–95), who was a founder member of the British Ornithologists' Club in 1892, certainly deserves a biography of this calibre and thoroughness, the only shame being the very short print run which may leave many bereft of a copy (only a few were left when I ordered mine). Tim Milsom has spent many years researching Seebohm's life story and his book is a wealth of careful research, and includes much of interest about Seebohm's contemporaries and the relationships he had with them.

Seebohm was an industrialist from Yorkshire, and as such an 'amateur', but he maintained close ties with the natural history departments of the British Museum and was much more than just a collector, having advanced ideas about evolutionary processes, bird breeding and their habitats. In the half century after his death, recognition of Seebohm's significance as an ornithological thinker declined, to the extent that Milsom flags up that almost his 'lone support' among British ornithologists in the period following WWII came from James Fisher, who considered Seebohm to be years before his time in his scientific thinking. For many years the Sheffield steel master was considered rather obscure and unimportant, but Milsom demonstrates the opposite is true, despite having had to rely on the fragmentary nature of Seebohm's archive, with his notebooks, annotated books and letters much dispersed or destroyed. However, the author has enjoyed the hunt for source material, which 'has been as absorbing as the writing of the book'. To emphasise the importance of writings on paper, Milsom quotes David Allen as saying: 'Manuscripts are the historian's bread, the basic source of sustenance without which his subject can scarcely exist'. It would be good to remember this; in this ever-more online world manuscripts and annotations are increasingly treated with cavalier abandon.

However, Seebohm's huge collection of well-labelled birds have fared better, most now residing in the Natural History Museum's out station at Tring, complete with a huge register which is devoted to the Yorkshireman's material and that of the Chiswick-based Edward Hargitt. Other Seebohm birds can be found elsewhere, such as in National Museum Liverpool, which has 130 of Seebohm's own specimens and others (including types) which he had acquired. Just as important to natural science are the several volumes of Seebohm's manuscript catalogue of the eggs in what was then the British Museum (Natural History), the hundreds of pages filled with Seebohm's careful sloping writing.

Milsom has carefully grouped his chapters, not necessarily in chronological order, as he is aware that many readers may only be interested in one particular aspect of Seebohm's life. We learn about Henry Seebohm's early life—the 'black sheep', whose male siblings did well in business. Henry took many years to make any money and vastly preferred to be out collecting birds and their eggs. He led an extraordinary ornithological life, in so many ways. His *History of British birds* (re-issued in 1896) is still widely consulted, even if it is over 120 years old. It is full of interesting field observations and erudite thought. Seebohm's contribution to the many volumed *Catalogue of the birds in the British Museum* (vol. 5, 1881: warblers and thrushes) is the classic record of the synonymy of the Turdidae, as well as having long and meticulous details of plumage. He travelled widely in his search for birds, especially in Siberia, the basis of his books (now considered classics) published in 1880, 1882 and 1901. Seebohm collected thousands of eggs but was just as diligent in recording their details for posterity and was the first to discover the nesting places of many rarities. He named many new species of birds, and many were named for him. Perhaps most importantly, Seebohm was among the first to seriously treat bird species as ever-changing and evolving, with geography playing a large part in this, and to champion the use of trinomials (subspecies) to indicate such development.

At 63 Seebohm died far too young, but (in addition to his election to ornithological societies) with the distinguished Society letters FLS, FZS and FRGS attached to his name, a stalwart and fully accepted part of the fabric of the British Museum (Natural History) and a man more than capable of standing his ground against the few who saw the blunt Yorkshireman as an upstart (yes, we particularly mean you, Alfred Newton). Seebohm had been on the British Ornithologists' Union Committee that led to the BOC being set up; he attended its inaugural meeting in October 1892 and eight of the nine subsequent meetings that took place in its first year of existence. He continued to attend meetings until to October 1895, the month before his death.

Clemency Fisher

Wiley, J. W. 2021. *The birds of St Vincent, The Grenadines and Grenada: an annotated checklist*. BOC Checklist Series 27. British Ornithologists' Club, Tring. 384 pp, 32 plates with 78 colour photos and 1 colour map. ISBN 978-0-9522886-8-8. £37.50.

The West Indies has been fortunate to have been the subject of half a dozen previous BOC (and BOU) checklists. The series is known for publishing detailed summaries of the status of every bird species recorded in a particular country or region, together with background information about the resultant avifauna. These checklists generally set rigorous standards for the evaluation and acceptance of published and unpublished records, and by weeding out doubtful or inadequately supported claims, they tend to be adopted as a firm baseline for further study.

The islands of St Vincent, the Grenadines and Grenada are arguably the corner of this region that was most in need of a thorough ornithological revision. Not only has there been confusion over the geographic assignment of records, caused by discrepancies between biogeographic and political names (the southern Grenadines are part of Grenada, rather than the country of St Vincent and the Grenadines), but a succession of previous checklists has admitted numerous records without the degree of evidence typically required by, for example, a national records committee. Furthermore, none of the previous checklists is readily available. The current work does much to bring clarity to this confusion by dividing the islands into three natural geological units, the largest islands of St Vincent and Grenada, and the Grenadines that run along the Grenada Bank between them; a map on p. 14 illustrates the relevant boundaries. The author removes 85 species for which occurrence in the islands is inadequately documented, relegating these unconfirmed species to 17 pages at the back of the book. They range from evident mistakes (Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*), to claims lacking any documentation, to intriguing records like the Lack's famous 1971 Common Swift *Apus apus* that Bond concluded was erroneous, notwithstanding the observers' unrivalled experience with the species, and which now seems decidedly less outlandish in the light of a bird photographed in Puerto Rico in 2015. The threshold of evidence required for inclusion in the main checklist rather than this appendix is not entirely clear, as other published sight records have been accepted. Several species that likely occur and have been included in previous checklists—notably migrant shorebirds and parulid warblers—have been relegated to the appendix pending concrete evidence of their occurrence. On the other hand, Wiley resurrects species whose occurrence had been overlooked by previous checklists and some regional field guides, like White-necked Jacobin *Florisuga mellivora* for which a 1904 specimen exists. Genuinely new records include anticipated additions like Antillean Nighthawk *Chordeiles gundlachi* and Great Shearwater *Ardenna gravis*, both having been confirmed since the author's death, as well as vagrants like Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*.

The main text accounts broadly follow the layout of previous BOC checklists. The 200 species recorded with certainty are treated under sections on global distribution, status within the present region, breeding data, and a discussion of any pertinent taxonomic issues. The distinction between the three biogeographical subunits is maintained. The author located more than 5,000 specimens across 27 museums, and these are listed at the end of each account. Species accounts are highly informative and provide unique insights into the endemic taxa of the Lesser Antilles. Wiley gives little hope for the continued survival of the only West Indian population of Euler's Flycatcher *Lathrotriccus euleri flaviventris* on Grenada (of which there are no records since the 1950s), or the Grenada Scaly-breasted Thrasher *Allenia fusca* 'fusca'. A section of colour plates illustrates habitats as well as some of the more representative taxa. It is hard to believe on the basis of these photographs (as well as voice) that the two House Wren taxa, *musicus* and *grenadensis*, are the same species.

The introductory chapters provide a reliable overview of geology, vegetation, climate, human colonisation, conservation and so forth—information that is not easy to find elsewhere. A ten-page reference history of ornithology helps put the names of contributors into context as they appear in the main text. A further 23 pages are devoted to biogeography, and include an overview table summarising at a glance the status of each species in the subregions of St Vincent, the Grenadines, Grenada, and the region as a whole.

This is a worthy addition to the BOC checklist series as well as to the author's already impressive body of literature on the West Indies. A key piece in the jigsaw of West Indian ornithology, it becomes the standard account of the avifauna of St Vincent, the Grenadines and Grenada. The editors and the authors' collaborators are to be congratulated on seeing this valuable work through to completion.

Christopher J. Sharpe

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### Friends of the BOC

The BOC has from 2017 become an online organisation without a paying membership, but instead one that aspires to a supportive network of Friends who share its vision of ornithology—see: <http://boc-online.org/>. Anyone wishing to become a Friend of the BOC and support its development should pay UK£25.00 by standing order or online payment to the BOC bank account:

Barclays Bank, 16 High Street, Holt, NR25 6BQ, Norfolk  
Sort Code: 20-45-45  
Account number: 53092003  
Account name: The British Ornithologists' Club

Friends receive regular updates about Club events and are also eligible for discounts on the Club's Occasional Publications. It would assist our Treasurer, Richard Malin (e-mail: rmalin21@gmail.com), if you would kindly inform him if you intend becoming a Friend of the BOC.

### **The *Bulletin* and other BOC publications**

Since volume 137 (2017), the *Bulletin* of the BOC has been an online journal, published quarterly, that is available to all readers without charge. Furthermore, it does not levy any publication charges (including for colour plates) on authors of papers and has a median publication time from receipt to publication of five to six months. Prospective authors are invited to contact the *Bulletin* editor, Guy Kirwan (GMKirwan@aol.com), to discuss future submissions or look at <http://boc-online.org/bulletin/bulletin-contributions>. Back numbers up to volume 136 (2016) are available via the Biodiversity Heritage Library website: [www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#/summary](http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#/summary); vols. 132–136 are also available on the BOC website: <http://boc-online.org/>

BOC Occasional Publications are available from the BOC Office or online at [info@boc-online.org](mailto:info@boc-online.org). Future BOC-published checklists will be available from NHBS and as advised on the BOC website. As its online repository, the BOC uses the British Library Online Archive (in accordance with IZCN 1999, Art. 8.5.3.1).