

## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

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# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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The Annual Report and Accounts for 2021 were submitted as required to the Charity Commission, distributed to Friends on 18 August 2022 and posted at: <https://boc-online.org/wp-content/uploads/BOC.AnnualReportandAccounts.2021.pdf>. We would be very pleased to answer by e-mail any questions that may arise from this report or on any other matter about the management of the Club.

Chris Storey

### The 1,003rd meeting of the Club was held via the online medium of Zoom on Monday 21 March 2022

The Natural History Museum's assistant archivist, Kathryn Rooke, spoke on *The Importation of the Plumage (Prohibition) Act of 1921, as told through the Natural History Museum's archive collections*. During the Victorian and Edwardian periods, demand for bird feathers in fashionable millinery led to the most luxurious of plumes literally being worth their weight in diamonds. Fulfilling this demand in turn led to populations of the birds most affected, such as egrets, birds of paradise, hummingbirds and grebes, being pushed towards extinction. The Natural History Museum's archives reveal the important role this organisation played in 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 culminated in the key 1921 act of parliament. The talk is still available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0tf2q4BvLU>.

## FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

The Club's next meeting, in conjunction with the Linnean Society, will be held on Thursday 6 October 2022 at 6.00pm, when Prof. Jared Diamond will talk on *What's so special about New Guinea birds?*

The meeting will be in hybrid format, both in person at the Linnean Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BF, and online via Zoom.

*Abstract:*—The tropical island of New Guinea has long played a pre-eminent role in ornithology, which caused it to be chosen as the site for the BOU's Jubilee Expedition in 1909. Part of the reason is New Guinea's many extraordinary birds, such as its birds of paradise, whose male ornamental plumages carry sexual selection to extremes; bowerbirds, whose males build the most elaborate display structures among animals; megapodes, the only birds that incubate their eggs by natural heat sources rather than by body heat; its diversity of parrots and kingfishers, orders that probably evolved in New Guinea; Greater Melampitta *Melampitta gigantea*, the only passerine known to roost underground; and its many bird groups convergent on but unrelated to the nuthatches, creepers, warblers, finches, wrens, and sunbirds of the rest of the world. Another reason is New Guinea's equatorial location combined with its high mountains, resulting in a range of habitats from tropical rainforest in the lowlands to glaciers on the highest peaks at 5,000 m. Still another reason is its simple geography: a single central cordillera with montane allospecies arranged from west to east, separating northern and southern lowlands with lowland allospecies arranged in a ring. New Guinea should not be thought of as the world's largest tropical island, but instead as Earth's smallest continent. New Guinea has proved to be ideal terrain for studying speciation, ecological segregation, and other biological phenomena. New Guineans themselves are walking encyclopedias of knowledge about their birds. The illustrated talk will explain these and other features that make New Guinea birds special. The only disadvantage to visiting New Guinea is that, thereafter, you'll find the rest of the world boring by comparison.

*Biography.*—Jared Diamond is a Pulitzer-prize-winning author of five best-selling books, translated into 43 languages, about human societies and human evolution: *Guns, germs, and steel*; *Collapse*; *Why is sex fun?*; *The third Chimpanzee*; and *The world until yesterday*. As a professor of geography at UCLA (University of California

at Los Angeles), he is known for his breadth of interests, which involves research and teaching in three other fields: the biology of New Guinea birds; digestive physiology; and conservation biology. His prizes and honours include the US National Medal of Science, the Pulitzer Prize for Non-fiction, the Tyler Prize for Environmental Science, and election to the US National Academy of Sciences. He is a director of World Wildlife Fund/US. As a biological explorer, his most widely publicised finding was his rediscovery, at the top of New Guinea's remote Foja Mountains, of the long-lost Golden-fronted Bowerbird *Amblyornis flavifrons*, previously known only from four specimens found in a Paris feather shop in 1895.

Registration details can be found at <https://boc-online.org/meetings/upcoming-meeting>.

The Club hopes to organise a further talk prior to the end of 2022. Keep an eye on the BOC website (see above) and the BOC twitter (@online\_BOC) feed for news of this.

## BOOK REVIEW

Jackson, C. E. 2021. *A newsworthy naturalist: the life of William Yarrell*. John Beaufoy Publishing Ltd., in association with the British Ornithologists' Club. 272 pp, 60 line drawings and 16 plates. £25.

Christine Jackson is well known as the author of numerous books on naturalists and the art of natural history. The present work is an exploration of the life of William Yarrell, one of the central figures of British natural history in the early 19th century. His name is perhaps best known today in the subspecies, Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii*, although his own claim to fame is as the first to distinguish and name Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus* as distinct from the Whooper Swan *C. cygnus*. Yarrell (1784–1856) was one of 12 children of Francis Yerrall/Yarrell and Sarah née Blane. For unknown reasons, the Yarrell's father changed the spelling of the family name. Although he had many siblings, only William and a sister, Caroline, survived into adulthood. The family had a long association with Bayford in Hertfordshire, where the family, including William's parents and all his siblings, are buried. His grandfather moved to London from Bedfordshire, to work in a family bookselling and newspaper business in Westminster. Incredibly, the firm is still in existence, as Jones, Yarrell and Co.

William Yarrell was born into a relatively affluent family. He entered a bank as a young man, before being invited to join the firm of Jones and Yarrell, where he remained for 50 years. This stability in business—with a steady income—made Yarrell's natural history work possible (and affordable). Yarrell never married, but had a large circle of associates in various fields of natural history, and he was a keen angler and a keen shot (in the style of many naturalists at that time) in his younger days.

As Jackson explains, Yarrell's activity was divided between three strands: as the partner and owner of the newspaper agency and bookseller; a natural history author; and a central member of London-based natural history societies, including the Linnean Society, Zoological Society and Entomological Society, among others.

The book is structured as a rather quick 'trot' through Yarrell's life. It takes us through Yarrell's interactions with many of the well-known naturalists of the day—Charles Darwin and John Gould, for example—and his various natural history friends. Chapter 7 is an analysis or commentary on his lifestyle and interests, derived from an analysis of the catalogue of the sale of his property, including his library, pictures, natural history collections (complete with Great Auk *Pinguinus impennis* egg) and a large coin collection, sold by J. C. Stevens in 1856. Chapter 8 takes us through his various publications, the best known of which are his *History of British fishes* (1835–36), a standard work for many decades, and *History of British birds* (1837–43, three volumes issued in bimonthly parts). The latter is, of course, well known among ornithologists as the standard work on the subject through the 19th century, with the notable innovation of including the earliest known record of the occurrence of a species in Great Britain. This was a foundation for subsequent developments, leading to the British List. A list of his publications is also provided. Chapter 9 gives a detailed account of Yarrell's involvement in natural history societies, and the posts he held in each.

The book itself is illustrated with four portraits, 12 plates and numerous line drawings. Particularly interesting illustrations are reproductions of the vignettes from his books, of a similar style to those used by Thomas Bewick. If anything, I would have preferred more of these, or fewer, but for them to be reproduced in larger size to be more readily viewable.

Jackson draws on a rich range of material, which she has researched meticulously. In general, the book remains strictly factual, and could have benefitted from a chapter or two on the context of 19th century natural history, to enable the reader to understand the place of natural history in the lives of people such as Yarrell and his contemporaries, against a backdrop of imperialism and colonialism; the strictly hierarchical nature of society; and the importance of class- and privilege-based access to specimens, publishing and elite societies. Such context would help to critique some of the well-worn tropes, such as Yarrell's position as a 'great shot', a trope to be found in the lives and works of many ornithologists from the time as an expression of 'manly vigour' and in the 'what's hit is history, what's missed is mystery' tradition. It would have been interesting and worthwhile to know more of Yarrell's father's income derived from annuities in the South Sea

Company. However, the book is a rich source of reference for details of the life and activities of one of the key figures of British natural history, and a worthwhile addition to ornithologists' libraries.

Henry McGhie

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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](mailto: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](mailto: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).