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# On the name *Struthio australis* Gurney Sr, 1868, and its type specimens

by Robert P. Prÿs-Jones & Judith White

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**SUMMARY.**—The name *Struthio australis* Gurney Sr, 1868, was based on three captive birds that arrived at the Zoological Society of London in November 1861. A skeleton of one of these is shown to survive in the bird collection of the Natural History Museum, but whether the other two syntypes still exist is doubtful.

In the *Catalogue of the birds in the British Museum* under the heading *Struthio australis*, Salvadori (1895: 576) referred to the specimen designated *g* as a ‘Type of species’, this being the skeleton of a bird from South Africa that had been purchased by the then British Museum (BM), now Natural History Museum (NHMUK), from the Zoological Society, which itself had acquired it from Sir George Grey. Seventy years later, however, in her catalogue of NHMUK non-passerine type specimens, Warren (1966: 26) wrote that ‘The type material, including the skeleton listed as type by Salvadori..., cannot be traced with certainty.’ However, our investigation suggests that Warren (1966) was mistaken regarding Salvadori’s listed type.

The name *Struthio australis* was first applied to the South African Ostrich by Gurney (1868). In doing so, he pointed out that although Sclater (1862a) had defined plumage differences between the South African Ostrich, of which the Zoological Society of London had obtained three live specimens from Sir George Grey (1812–98) on 1 November 1861, and the North African Ostrich *S. camelus*, he had failed to provide a name for the southern form. In fact, shortly thereafter Sclater (1862b) provided a name for two (a male and a female) of these birds in a separate paper, but only by means of the bald statement ‘Var. *meridionalis*’ and without reference to his prior description of their distinguishing characteristics. Use of ‘Var.’ would not of itself debar subsequent use of *meridionalis* in a subspecific context (ICZN 1999, Art. 45.6.4), but the name given by Sclater (1862b), lacking any associated description, was a *nomen nudum*, and was seemingly not used in later publications (*cf.* Salvadori 1895: 575); instead, *australis*, based on the three specimens mentioned above, has been the accepted scientific designation for the South African Ostrich since it was published.

Sir George Grey was Governor of Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa from 1854 until 1861. As well as being a colonial administrator, he was an enthusiastic naturalist who collected a wide array of plants and animals, both living and dead, some of which he passed to museums, zoos and botanical gardens in Britain, and he became a member of the Zoological Society of London (Spearman 2000). Notably, Grey had a keen interest in ostriches, playing a key role in their domestication in South Africa and thereby laying the foundation for the ostrich farming industry there (Rees & Rees 1898). From at least 1858, Grey was presenting live animals to the Zoological Society (Scherren 1905), and in summer 1859 these included two young ostriches from South Africa, which unfortunately died before they were old enough to be compared to the North African Ostriches already living there (Sclater 1862a). Subsequently, in 1861 he contributed ‘two valuable collections of animals’ to the Zoological Society, which were brought back to Britain by a Mr James Benstead, ‘a collector employed by the Society’ (Scherren 1905: 130). The second of these

collections, handed over in November, included the three living South African Ostriches referred to above (Sclater 1862a).

Unfortunately, the BM's *Catalogue of birds*, where Salvadori (1895) listed the *australis* type, does not include registration numbers, unique to each specimen. However, both its General Register and Aves Skeleton Register record a still extant specimen 1862.12.22.3, purchased from the Zoological Society and registered as being the skeleton of a *Struthio*, which from its assigned number must have been acquired in or somewhat before December 1862. Although the Zoological Society had taken possession of three living South African Ostriches on 1 November 1861, only two can still have been alive at the end of 1861, i.e. those listed by Sclater (1862b: 71), whose volume included '... only the Vertebrated animals living in the Gardens on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December last' (Sclater 1862b: iii). By the end of 1862, apparently all had died, as they are not mentioned in the equivalent volume by Sclater (1863: 86). Therefore certainly at least one of the original three 'Var. *meridionalis*' mentioned by Sclater (1862a) was already dead in good time to become what is now NHMUK 1862.12.22.3.

At that time, the BM was also still noting acquisitions of bird skeletons, though no longer bird skins, soon after their arrival in the museum in its Vellum Catalogue series, which recorded each specimen by species rather than by its arrival batch (Knox & Walters 1992). The entry for specimen 1862.12.22.3 there, as Skel. Vell. Cat. 356f, i.e. as the sixth specimen on the page created for *Struthio camelus* skeletal material, greatly strengthens the case for it belonging to the *australis* type series, as it additionally refers to it as 'variety *Struthio meridionalis* Sclater'. This was seemingly done to distinguish the specimen as the first of this variety knowingly to be acquired by the BM, and indeed the apparently original BM label attached to the specimen also states '*Struthio meridionalis*'. Its scientific interest was therefore both realised and highlighted at acquisition by the BM.

There thus appears little doubt that the skeleton registered as NHMUK 1862.12.22.3, which is also Skel. Vell. Cat. 356f and matches the locality and acquisition details of specimen g in Salvadori (1895), is one of the original type series of the name *Struthio australis* Gurney Sr, 1868, although ironically it now obviously lacks any of the distinguishing plumage features used to define the taxon. The whereabouts, or indeed continued existence, of the other two types is unclear, as is the precise part of southern Africa from which they all originated.

In this context, it may be noted that Vincent (1949: 148) restricted the type locality of *Struthio camelus australis* to 'Naarip Plain, near Walvis Bay, S. W. Africa', and this seems to have been accepted by most authorities subsequently (e.g. Clancey 1965, 1980, Hockey *et al.* 2005). However, the grounds which Vincent provided for doing this are less than compelling, as they relate to comments on *S. c. australis* in Andersson (1872), by both his editor Gurney and Andersson himself, that do not appear to be directly linked to the type series. Although the collector Andersson was at Walvis Bay in late August 1861 and apparently on his way to Cape Town (Dean *et al.* 2006), it remains to be established definitively from whom and from where Grey and Benstead acquired the type series of *Struthio australis*.

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