

On another specimen of Faeroese white-speckled raven *Corvus corax varius*

Authors: van Grouw, Hein, and Johannessen, Lars Erik

Source: Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club, 144(3) : 238-241

Published By: British Ornithologists' Club

URL: <https://doi.org/10.25226/bboc.v144i3.2024.a4>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

On another specimen of Faeroese white-speckled raven *Corvus corax varius*

by Hein van Grouw & Lars Erik Johannessen

Received 19 February 2024; revised 16 April 2024; published 2 September 2024

<http://zoobank.org/urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:DB004F1B-3E29-4622-9014-DC054E132FE3>

SUMMARY.—The white-speckled raven, a colour aberration of the Faeroese Common Raven *Corvus corax varius* Brünnich, 1764, has occurred on the Faeroe Islands since at least the Middle Ages and was always prized by collectors. In the second half of the 19th century while the Faeroese raven population was suffering intense persecution, pied individuals were even more severely hunted, and were extinct by the early 20th century. Twenty-six specimens had been recorded so far in different museum collections, but a 27th has now come to light in the Natural History Museum of the University of Oslo. The collector is unknown but given the collection date, 1846, it was probably an islander rather than a foreign collector.

Since the Middle Ages, the white-speckled or pied raven, a colour mutation of the Faeroese Common Raven *Corvus corax varius*, was known among the Faroese people as the 'Hvitavnur'. Despite being an important part of the culture of the islands, the last pied bird was shot in 1902 (van Grouw 2014). A sharp decline in raven numbers on the Faeroes after 1850 was mainly due to the significant increase in the human population, in combination with the local beak-tax that was still in force (Bloch 2012). In addition to the species being hunted for pest control purposes, white-speckled individuals were consistently targeted for foreign collections, especially in the 19th century. It is assumed that, along with the bird shot in 1902, the recessive allele for the pied plumage (leucism) was also lost in Faeroese ravens as a result of genetic drift in combination with the much-reduced population (van Grouw 2014).

A remarkable bird, living in small numbers in a remote place, was inevitably targeted by collectors. Both living birds and mounted specimens of the white-speckled raven were sent to museums and collections of curiosities all over Europe since the 17th century. Until now 26 birds, dispersed across 15 different museums, had been documented (van Grouw & Bloch 2015). Recently, however, a previously unrecorded specimen in the Natural History Museum, University of Oslo came to light, of which details are presented below, as well as a discussion of who may have been the collector.

The Oslo specimen

Mounted specimen, registration number NHMO-BI-68091, adult female originally labelled '*Corvus corax*, Lin. 1766, var., female, Thorshavn, Færøerne, 6 Dec. 46, Aalls S.' (Fig. 1). It was acquired by the museum in 1884, from the private collection of the steel mill company A/S Jacob Aall & Søn outside Tvedestrand, Norway ('Aalls S.' on the label refers to this collection, see Fig. 2). Jacob Aall (1773–1844) bought the steel mill Næs Jernverk in 1799, and in the 1830s his son Nicolai Benjamin (1805–88) joined the company. While Jacob had large collections of books and paintings, it was Nicolai who built up the collection of birds, mammals and other Naturalia. Most of it was probably amassed during the late 1840s (Mehlum 2021), but he continued to add to the collection well into the 1880s.

This collection of mammals, birds, insects and minerals grew to become the largest of its kind in Norway. When the company went bankrupt in 1884, the director of the



Figure 1. Mounted specimen of white-speckled Common Raven *Corvus corax varius* in the collection of the Natural History Museum of the University of Oslo, registration number NHMO-BI-68091, an adult female collected in 1846 originally labelled 'Corvus corax, Lin. 1766, var., female, Thorshavn, Færøerne, 6 Dec. 46, Aalls S.' (Lars Erik Johannessen, © Natural History Museum of the University of Oslo)

Zoological Museum in Christiania (now Oslo), Robert Collett (1842–1913), applied for and was afforded an extraordinary grant from the Norwegian Parliament, for the museum to purchase the collection from the estate. It then contained 845 specimens of 294 bird taxa, including the only Norwegian specimen of Great Auk *Pinguinus impennis*. It also held three ravens *Corvus corax*, a male and a female plus one 'varietet'. The latter was the Faeroese white-speckled raven currently registered as NHMO-BI-68091.



Figure 2. Two earlier labels, one attached to the base (above) and one hidden underneath the more recent label (below); it is remarkable that neither label mentions the name *leucophaeus* given by Vieillot in 1817, which was commonly used for the black-and-white birds until the early 1900s (Lars Erik Johannessen, © Natural History Museum of the University of Oslo)

Discussion

It was the sad fate of most, if not all, of the Faeroese white-speckled ravens in the 19th century to have been killed for foreign collections. To our knowledge, the first foreign collector in the 19th century was Carl Julian (von) Graba (1799–1874), a Danish/German lawyer and naturalist based in Hamburg who visited the Faeroes for three months in 1828. He collected two white-speckled ravens (Graba 1830). One of these is most likely to be the specimen now in the Biodiversity Center Naturalis in Leiden, but the whereabouts of the second specimen is unknown (van Grouw & Bloch 2015). The second foreign collector may have been Johannes Japetus Smith Steenstrup (1813–97), a professor at the University of Copenhagen, who visited the Faeroes in June–July 1844 (Steenstrup 1914). No evidence is known as to whether he collected any ravens during his stay in 1844 or visited the Faeroes again subsequently.

Besides collectors visiting the Faeroes to obtain specimens for themselves, many island residents were involved in procuring them to order. The most prolific local collector of white-speckled ravens was probably Hans Christopher Müller (1818–97). Although he did not start collecting actively before 1860, Müller may have been aware of the specimen collected in 1846. Müller was a sheriff on the island Streymoy in the Faeroes, a national politician and a keen naturalist who published *Fauna of the Faeroes* (Müller 1862). In his

Fauna he mentioned the white-speckled raven only briefly as being not that uncommon. Later, however, Müller became more interested in the white-speckled ravens, but not only from a scientific perspective. After 1862, Müller started to collect birds and eggs for foreign museums and private collections. He sent pied raven skins to the Royal Museum of Natural History in Copenhagen, and to private collectors in Europe. For more information on these and other collectors of white-speckled ravens see van Grouw & Bloch (2015).

Johannes Christopher Hagemann Reinhardt (1778–1845), curator at the Royal Museum of Natural History in Copenhagen from 1806 and professor at the University of Copenhagen from 1814, asked Emilius Marius Georgius Løbner (1766–1849), Governor of the Faeroes between 1816 and 1828, for skins of birds in different life stages, as well as for eggs. Reinhardt was also a fellow student and good friend of Jacob Aall, and both Jacob and Nicolai were on friendly terms with several central persons in Copenhagen, including Reinhardt's student and successor in his professorship, Steenstrup.

It is known that Nicolai Aall exchanged specimens with Reinhardt, and in 1845 he acquired the Great Auk specimen in exchange for a Norwegian Brown Bear *Ursus arctos*. The Aall collection also contained several white Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* skins from Greenland, probably obtained from the museum in Copenhagen. This museum had received several such skins from the Inspector of South Greenland, Carl Peter Holbøll (1795–1856), himself an ornithologist who had collected the skins in 1840–42 (Mehlum 2021). Further, in a letter to Halvor Heyerdahl Rasch (1805–83) at the Zoological Museum in Christiania [now Oslo] in May 1847, Nicolai wrote that he was expecting 'some good stuff' from Steenstrup in Copenhagen (Mehlum 2021).

It is therefore very likely that the white-speckled raven now at NHMO came to the Aall collection via Steenstrup in Copenhagen, perhaps as part of the 1847 shipment mentioned in the letter to Rasch. While Steenstrup did visit the Faeroe Islands in 1844 (Mehlum 2021), it is more likely that the Oslo specimen was collected by a Faeroese resident and later sent to Copenhagen.

Acknowledgements

We thank our reviewers Robert Prÿs-Jones and Clem Fisher for their constructive comments. We also thank Fridtjof Mehlum for discussions relating to the Aall father and son and the origin of specimens in their collection, and Peter Hosner at the Natural History Museum of Denmark, for assistance checking archival records pertaining to the bird collection in Copenhagen.

References:

- Bloch, D. 2012. Beak tax to control predatory birds in the Faeroe Islands. *Arch. Nat. Hist.* 39: 126–135.
- Graba, C. J. 1830 *Tagebuch geführt auf einer Reise nach Färö im Jahre 1828*. Hamburg.
- van Grouw, H. 2014. Some black-and-white facts about the Faeroese white-speckled Common Raven *Corvus corax varius*. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 134: 4–13.
- van Grouw, H. & Bloch, D. 2015. History of the extant museum specimens of the Faeroese white-speckled raven. *Arch. Nat. Hist.* 42: 23–38.
- Mehlum, F. 2021. Nicolai Benjamin Aall (1805–1888) og hans naturhistoriske samlinger. *Fortuna* 7: 80–119.
- Müller, H. C. 1862. Færøernes Fuglefauna med Bemærkninger om Fuglefangsten. *Vidensk. Medd. fra Dansk Naturh. Foren.* 24: 1–78.
- Steenstrup, J. 1914. *Japetus Steenstrup i Ungdomsaarene 1813–1845. En Skildring*. Pp. 1–68 in Jungersen, H. F. E. & Warming, E. (eds.) *Mindeskrift i Anledning af Hundreaaret for Japetus Steenstrups Fødsel*, vol. 1. København.

Addresses: Hein van Grouw, Bird Group, Natural History Museum, Akeman Street, Tring, Herts. HP23 6AP, UK, e-mail: h.van-grouw@nhm.ac.uk. Lars Erik Johannessen, Dept. of Technical and Scientific Conservation, Natural History Museum, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1172 Blindern, NO-0318 Oslo, Norway, e-mail: l.e.johannessen@nhm.uio.no