

## PHAËTHON CATESBYI BRANDT.

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INVESTIGATION of the forms of the family Phaëthontidæ for the purpose of my 'Birds of Australia' compelled the determination of the above name with the result that I find it must displace *Phaëthon americanus* Ogilvie-Grant. This latter name is accepted in the Amer. Ornith. Union's Check-List, 3d Ed., p. 59, 1910, so that I must give reasons for its rejection.

When Ogilvie-Grant monographed 'the family in the 'Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum,' Vol. XXVI, he was enabled, through a recent discovery of Mr. C. D. Sherborn, to follow strictly the law of priority and displace the well-known *Phaëthon candidus*, by the hitherto unheard of *Phaëthon lepturus* of Lacepède and Daudin. He was also able to indicate that *Phaëthon flavirostris* Brandt had been misapplied to the American bird, which differed from the Mauritius species, of which Brandt's name became a synonym. For the American species, he therefore proposed *Phaëthon americanus* and this name has been admitted for seventeen years.

This provides another of those strange anomalies which have been constantly noted by myself while engaged in the determination of Australian birds. I refer to the acceptance of names utilised in the 'Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum' by American ornithologists when a very little investigation would have proved their inapplicability. In the 'Catalogue of Birds of the British Museum,' Vol. XXVI, p. 456, 1898, where *Phaëthon americanus* is catalogued the very first reference reads:

"Tropick Bird, Catesb. Car. II App. pl. 14 (1743) (Bermuda; Porto Rico)."

The following is the gist of the account there given: "Mr. Willughby's description . . . differs somewhat from ours, which was made from the living Bird. The legs in his, by long keeping, had lost their red colour, which all that I have seen, while living, have. This Bird is about the size of a Partridge, and has very long wings.

The bill is red, with an angle under the lower mandible like those of the Gull kind, of which it is a species. The eyes are encompassed with black, which ends in a point towards the back of the head. Three or four of the larger quill feathers, towards their ends, are black, tipped with white; all the rest of the Bird is white, except the back which is variegated with curved lines of black. The legs and feet are of a vermilion red. The toes are webbed. The tail consists of two long straight narrow feathers, almost of equal breadth from their quills to their points. These Birds are rarely seen but between the Tropicks, at the remotest distance from land . . . yet one of their breeding-places is almost nine degrees from the northern Tropic, viz. at Bermudas, where from the high rocks that environ those Islands, I have shot them at the time of their breeding . . . they breed also in great numbers on some little Islands at the east end of Porto Rico."

For the time when this article was written, 1743, this is a most accurate and complete description of the Bermuda bird, and the figure given is a splendid one of the species known as the Yellow-billed Tropic-bird.

As a synonym of *Phaëthon æthereus*, Ogilvie-Grant ranged:

"*Phaëton catesbyi*, Brandt, Mem. Acad. St. Petersb. (6) v, pt. II, p. 270 (1840) (Bermuda: Rico)."

I trace this determination through Gray (Handl. Gen. Sp. Birds, pt. III, p. 124, 1871) to Bonaparte (Consp. Gen. Av. II, p. 183, 1857). Reference, however, to Brandt's paper shows that he gave this name to the "Avis Tropicorum, Catesby, Nat. Hist. of Carol I., II. Ed. Edwards, p. 114, t. 14." This is simply a reprint of the account given by Catesby as quoted above, with the same plate reproduced.

If Catesby's name be applicable to *Phaëthon americanus* Grant then Brandt's name must be and it has 57 years' priority. In Catesby's description three debatable points may be noticed. First, the bill is given as red. This species is known as the Yellow-billed Tropic Bird and in the 'Water Birds of North America,' Vol. II, p. 186, 1884, the bill is described as deep chrome or wax yellow and a footnote reads: "Audubon describes the bill of the male as "orange-red," and that of the female as yellow: but he

seems to have had *P. aëthereus* in mind in the former case, though his description otherwise applies exclusively to *P. flavirostris*."

In 'The Ibis,' 1914, Karl Plath has written about the Bermuda *Phaëthon* and on p. 554 observes: "I had noticed that the birds flying about seemed to have orange red bills rather than the yellow to which they owe their name, and this bird certainly had a red bill. I called the attention of my companion to it, and we agreed that it could be best described as bright orange-red, inclining to vermilion on the upper ridge."

This confirms the accuracy of Catesby's observation with regard to the bill-colouration, but Karl Plath's legs and feet colouration does not coincide with that given by Catesby. The other points are the omission of the black band along the wing and the scapular colouration while the back is said to be variegated with curved lines of black. The figure given shows these black lines to be practically coincident with the black scapulars while if the figured or described bird were slightly immature it might show black lines on the back. The description as a whole is quite inapplicable to *P. aëthereus* and seems quite good enough for acceptance. As far as I can trace only one species of *Phaëthon* breeds at Bermuda where Catesby procured specimens himself. I designate Bermuda as the type-locality of *Phaëthon catesbyi* Brandt and recommend its usage for the American Tropic Bird, known as the Yellow-billed Tropic Bird. As this is a misnomer, why not replace it by "Catesby's Tropic Bird" and thus honour the writer of one of the most interesting books on American natural history?

I would remark that for the small Tropic Birds I use the generic name *Leptophaëthon* which I introduced in the 'Austral Avian Record,' Vol. II, p. 56, 1913, with type *Phaëthon lepturus* Daudin. These have only twelve tail-feathers as against the fourteen of *P. aëthereus* or the sixteen of *P. rubricauda*. They are smaller, more delicately formed birds and the tail is of a different nature. The elongated central tail-feathers have comparatively wide webs, and the tail otherwise is strongly wedge-shaped, the two feathers adjacent to the central ones being twice as long as the outside feathers.

To be consistent with their general usage as regards genera American ornithologists must accept my genus *Leptophaëthon*.