

# Charles Darwin's lost Cinereous Harrier found in the collection of the National Museum of Natural History Leiden

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During reorganisation of the Leiden bird collection a mounted harrier was found what seemed to be one of the still lost specimens collected by Darwin. After closer research it turned out it was indeed the last missing harrier of the Darwin collection.

## Introduction

During the voyage of the H.M.S. *Beagle*, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and his assistant Syms Covington (c. 1816-1861) collected 468 bird skins, ten parts of the Lesser Rhea *Pterocnemia pennata* (d'Orbigny, 1834) subsequently mounted to one composite specimen, the nests and eggs of 16 taxa, and 14 complete birds and four parts of specimens in alcohol (Steinheimer 2004). While for about half of the specimens the whereabouts is known (Sulloway 1982, Steinheimer 2004 appendix), still a good number of this historically famous collection is considered lost. However, also thanks to these previous studies, additional Darwin specimens are still rediscovered; and in this case a harrier from the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas).

Darwin collected five specimens of harrier during his voyage (Barlow, 1963). One Long-winged Harrier *Circus buffoni* (J.F. Gmelin, 1788) (Darwin number 1396), he caught during his visit to the La Plata region near Maldonado, Uruguay, in July 1833. Four specimens of the Cinereous Harrier *Circus cinereus* Vieillot, 1816, were collected on the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) in March 1833 and March 1834 (1054, 1160, 1881) and in Chile in the first half of 1835 (2822). The whereabouts of all but one specimen of harrier from Darwin's collection was known to Steinheimer in 2004. Now the last missing harrier has been located at the National Museum of Natural History Naturalis, Leiden (formerly Rijks Museum van Natuurlijke Historie, RMNH).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Six further specimens of Darwin ae at the RMNH: *Phytotoma rara* Molina, 1782, *Camarhynchus crassirostris* Gould, 1837, *Geospiza scandens scandens* (Gould, 1837) and three specimens of *Geospiza fuliginosa* Gould, 1837.



Photo 1: Side view of the Cinereous Harrier *Circus cinereus* Vieillot, 1816, from Darwin's collection. It was shot on East Falkland Island (Islas Malvinas) in March 1833. RMNH 157051 (Cat. No. 7). © National Museum of Natural History Naturalis, Leiden.

### Specimen description

*Circus cinereus* Vieillot, 1816. (Charles Darwin number 1160 in Barlow 1963; this number is linked with the specimen due to earlier research but not found at the label attached to the bird or on writing underneath the wooden sole).

RMNH 157051. Male, juv. plumage. Mounted skin. Loc.: Islas Malvinas (on label), East Falkland Island (underneath sole), March 1833 (not mentioned on label or sole). Leg: Ch. Darwin/S. Covington. RMNH Cat. No. 7. Don.: Frank 1860 (underneath sole), Gould, Zoological Society London (not mentioned on label or sole).

The label was given by RMNH staff around 1860. The date mentioned there refers to the date Darwin presented his specimen to the Zoological Society of London (see below).

## Historical background

RMNH 157051 was one of many specimens Hermann Schlegel (1804-1884), director of the RMNH, bought from Gustav Adolph Frank (1808-1880), a natural history and book dealer in Amsterdam, in 1860.<sup>2</sup>

Frank himself had obtained the specimens from John Gould (1804-1881), the former vertebrate curator of the Zoological Society of London, between 1856 and 1859. Darwin presented upon his return from the voyage most of his bird specimens to the Society Museum (Steinheimer 2004). This date, 4 January 1837, can still be found on many of his bird specimens, but being erroneously mentioned as the collection date. And this has also happened on the label of Darwin's *Circus cinereus* in the Leiden collection. In 1855, the Zoological Society Museum was broken up and the British Museum (BMNH) had first choice of specimens. George Robert Gray (1808-1872), then the assistant curator of zoology of the BMNH, was entrusted with the selection of important material for the BMNH (Sharpe 1906: 251). Many types and historically important specimens, though, were overlooked by Gray, or, possibly not shown to him by John Gould. Whatever the case, some of the remaining skins not chosen by Gray were subsequently sold to other bidders, but most went into the private collection of John Gould.

## Importance

Darwin in Gould (1839: 30-31; for details on this publication see Steinheimer *et al.* 2006) reported on the Cinereous Harrier and his observations from the East Falkland Island: "at the Falkland Islands it was, for one of its order, very tame", and Darwin apparently saw this harrier "feeding on the carrion of a dead cow." In his field notes Darwin was not quite sure about the identification to genus level of the shot specimen; he called the bird just a *Falco* (Barlow 1963: 214, no. 1160). While Darwin often felt lost with the birds' taxonomy (cf. Steinheimer 2004), his observations are always exact and of interest. Later authorities confirmed the unusual feeding behaviour: Cinereous Harriers also take carrion (Woods 1988). Today the Cinereous Harrier is nearly extinct on the Falkland Islands. Sightings are rare and they may not longer breed on these islands (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Besides its historical value, the specimen therefore has also importance for taxonomy as being one of the rare autochthon breeding birds of the Falkland Islands population.

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<sup>2</sup> Two *Nesopelia galapagoensis galapagoensis* (Gould, 1841) specimens in the RMNH were presumed to be collected by Darwin too (cf. Sulloway 1982). But also BMNH (coll. Eyton/ZSL) claimed to possess a specimen. However, Darwin collected only a single dove on the Galápagos Islands [Darwin number 3305]. So, it is now believed that the two specimens at Leiden (Cat. No. 1, 2) probably derive from coll. Fuller/Covington and that the BMNH specimen, formerly from the ZSL, is Darwin's specimen (BMNH 1881.2.18.84. Cat. XXI: 391: c). Nevertheless, the RMNH specimens probably have type status of Gould's name.

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