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HANDBOOK

TO THE

BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA.

BY

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MONOGRAPHS OF THE TROCHILIDÆ,
RAMPHASTIDÆ, TROGONIDÆ,
ODONTOPHORINÆ, ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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The whole of the plumage black, glossed with green; the tail largely tipped with white; bill horn-colour, much darker at the base; wattles rich orange; legs and toes blackish horn-colour; claws light horn-colour.

Family EPIMACHIDÆ.

Genus SEMIOPTERA, *G. R. Gray.*

At present the single species known of this genus stands alone and is rendered very remarkable by the white plumes which spring from the centre part of each wing.

Sp. 7. SEMIOPTERA WALLACEI, *G. R. Gray.*

STANDARD-WING.

Paradisea wallacei, *G. R. Gray* in *Proc. of Zool. Soc.*, part xxvii.
p. 130.

Semioptera, *G. R. Gray*, *Ib.*

Semioptera wallacei, *Gould*, *Birds of Australia*, fol., Supplement,
pl.

The Standard-wing, the most remarkable Insessorial bird that has been discovered for many years, was obtained by A. R. Wallace, Esq., in the island of Batchian, one of the Moluccas, which, according to Guthrie's 'Geography,' "produces cloves, is very fruitful, and belongs to the Dutch; long. 125° 5' E." How much gratified Mr. Wallace must have been when this remarkable form first met his gaze! and how enthusiastically does he write on this and the other objects with which he was surrounded:—

In a letter to Mr. S. Stevens he says, "Here I have been only five days, yet I believe I have already secured the *finest and most wonderful* bird in the island. I consider it the *greatest* discovery I have yet made; and it gives me hopes of getting other species in Gilolo and Ceram. There is also here a species of Monkey—much further eastwards than in any

other island; so you see this is a most curious locality, combining forms of the East and West of the Archipelago, yet with species peculiar to itself. It also differs from all the other Moluccas in its geological formation, containing iron, coal, copper, and gold, with a glorious forest vegetation, and fine large mountain streams: it is a continent in miniature. The Dutch are working the coals; and there is a good road to the mines, which gives one easy access to the interior forests."

At the meeting of the Zoological Society, held on the 22nd March, 1859, Mr. G. R. Gray remarked that "this bird proves to be a new form: it has, springing from the lesser coverts of each wing, two long shafts, both of which are webbed on each side at the apex. It is the possession of these peculiar winged standards that induces me to propose for it the subgeneric appellation of *Semioptera*; and I further add the provisional specific name of *wallacei*, which appellation I think is justly due to Mr. Wallace for the indefatigable energy he has hitherto shown in the advancement of ornithological and entomological knowledge, by visiting localities rarely if ever travelled by naturalists."

This beautiful bird is very closely allied to *Ptilorhis*, and on comparing it with the well-known Rifle-bird of Australia, *Ptilorhis paradisea*, it will be seen that they are very similar both in their structure and in the disposition of their markings: the same great difference in the outward appearance of the sexes also occurs in both.

Mr. Wallace informed me in a letter, which I subsequently read at a meeting of the Zoological Society, that "the *Semioptera* frequents the lower trees of the virgin forests, and is almost constantly in motion. It flies from branch to branch and clings to the twigs and even to the vertical smooth trunks almost as easily as a Woodpecker. It continually utters a harsh croaking cry, something between that of *Paradisea apoda* and the more musical cry of *Cicinnurus regius*. The males, at short intervals, open and flutter their wings, erect the long

shoulder feathers, and expand the elegant shields on each side of the breast. Like the Birds of Paradise, the females and young birds far outnumber the fully plumaged birds, which renders it probable that the extraordinary accessory plumes are not fully developed until the third or fourth year. The bird seems to feed principally upon fruit, but it probably takes insects occasionally.

“I have obtained a few examples of apparently the same bird from *Gilolo*, but in these the crown is of a more decided violet hue, and the plumes of the breast are much larger.”

On the basal half of the upper mandible a series of erected tuft-like feathers of a pale sandy buff, blending on the forehead into the delicate velvety dove-coloured feathers of the crown and occiput; sides of the head, back of the neck, and upper surface light brown, becoming darker and having a velvety appearance on the back and scapularies, each of these feathers has also a very narrow edging of a lighter hue; wings light brown, fading into buffy white, with a silver gloss at the tips of the primaries and secondaries; shafts of the primaries white; the two lengthened plumes springing from each shoulder snowy white; tail brown with white shafts, and becoming of a silvery light brown at the tip; throat, neck, chest, and projecting side-feathers of the breast bordered with brilliant green, giving it a scaled appearance; flanks washed with the same colour, but less brilliant; thighs light brown; irides deep blue; bill horny-olive; feet orange; claws horny.

The female has the tuft on the upper mandible and the crown of the head the same as in the male, and is entirely devoid of the green colouring and lengthened plumes both of the breast and wings, her entire plumage being brown, without ornamentation of any kind.