

THE
BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA.

BY

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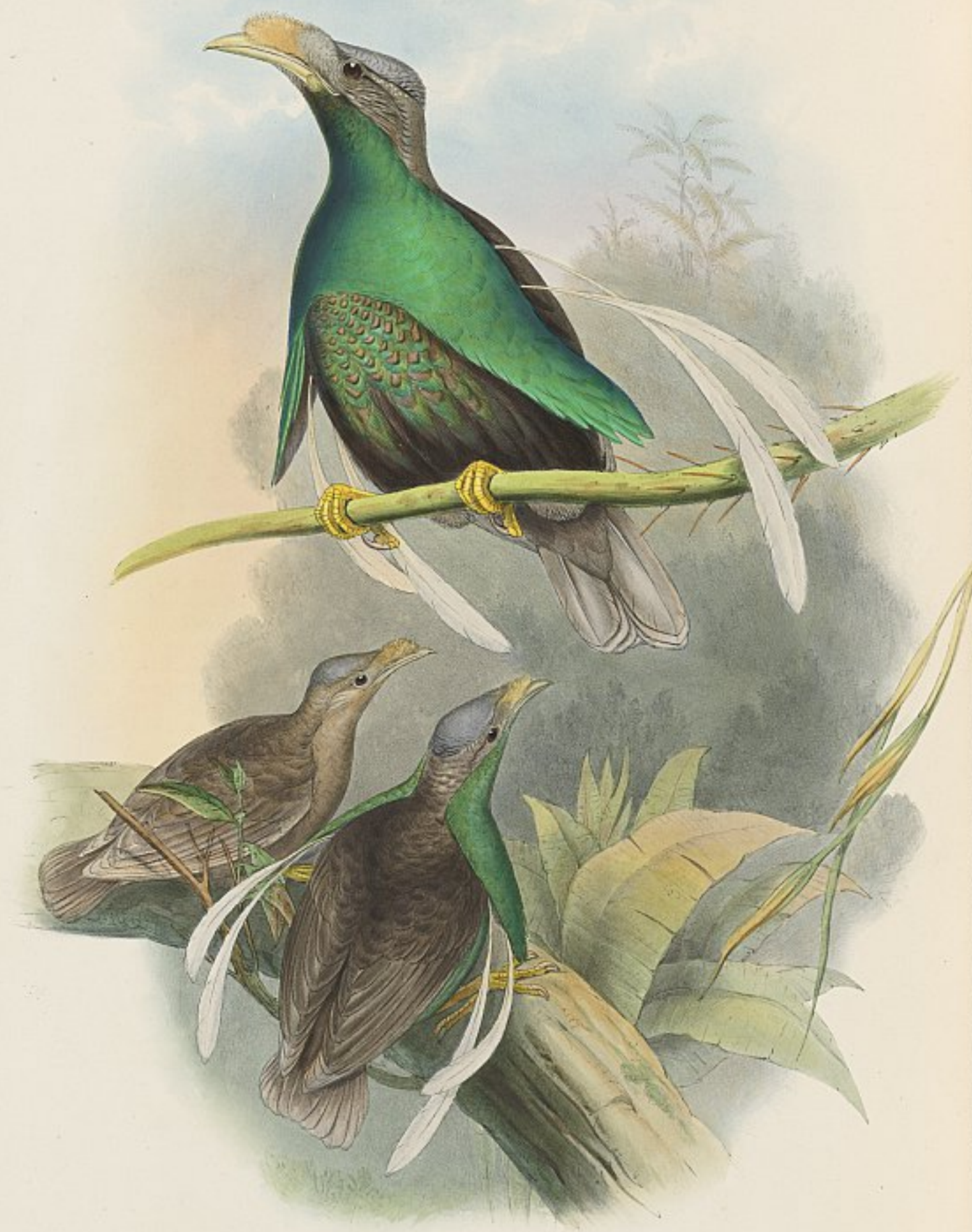
SUPPLEMENT.

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SEMIOPTERA WALLACEI, Gray

SEMIOPTERA WALLACEI, G. R. Gray.

Standard-Wing.

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

Semioptera, G. R. Gray, *ib.*

ONE of the most remarkable Insectorial birds that has been discovered for many years is the one just sent to London by A. R. Wallace, Esq., from the island of Batchian, and to which Mr. G. R. Gray has given the generic appellation of *Semioptera*. 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 is surrounded!—determining to keep his discovery secret, yet not resisting the temptation to make it known when next he writes home. As many of my readers may not be acquainted with the position of the island of Batchian, I may state that it is one of the Moluccas, and, according to Guthrie's 'Geography,' "produces cloves, is very fruitful, and belongs to the Dutch; long. 125° 5' E." Now, if there be one nation which has paid more attention to the natural productions of their foreign possessions than any other, it is the Dutch: how, then, is it that so conspicuous a bird as the *Semioptera* should not have been sent to Holland, and made known by Temminck or Schlegel? With what pleasure and enthusiasm would its arrival have been hailed at their great Leyden Museum! Thus much by way of prelude: I shall now proceed to give a copy of Mr. Wallace's letter to Mr. S. Stevens, in which he announces his interesting discovery:—

"Batchian, Moluccas, Oct. 20, 1858.

"Here I have been as yet only five days; but from the nature of the country, and what I have already done, I am inclined to think it may prove one of the best localities I have yet visited. Birds are as yet very scarce; but I still hope to get a fine collection, though I believe I have already the *finest and most wonderful* bird in the island. I had a good mind to keep it a secret, but I cannot resist telling you. I have a *new Bird of Paradise!* of a new genus!! quite unlike anything yet known, very curious and very handsome!!! When I can get a couple of pairs, I will send them overland, to see what a new Bird of Paradise will really fetch. Had I seen the bird in Ternate, I should never have believed it came from *here*, so far out of the hitherto supposed region of the *Paradisæide*. 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.

"I can do nothing at drawing birds, but send you a horrible sketch of my discovery, that you may not die of curiosity. I am told the wet season here is terrible, and that it begins in December; so I shall probably have to leave then."

The sketch alluded to in the above extract having been placed in Mr. G. R. Gray's hands for examination and comparison with other known species, the following notes of that gentleman relative to it were read to the meeting (of the Zoological Society, March 22nd, 1859):—

"This bird proves, as Mr. Wallace remarks in his letter, 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."

On the 28th of June 1859, in the absence of Mr. G. R. Gray from London, I exhibited to the meeting of the Zoological Society, held in the evening of that day, some specimens of both sexes of this singular bird which had just arrived, and took the opportunity of remarking that, while I considered Mr. Gray right in giving it a new generic appellation, the family to which Mr. Wallace had assigned it was not, in my opinion, the right one. This beautiful bird is not indeed a Bird of Paradise if we regard the *Paradisaea apoda* and *P. Papuana* as typical examples of that group; it is in fact very closely allied to *Ptiloris*, so nearly so, indeed, as scarcely to be separable from that form; for on comparing it with the well-known Rifle-bird of Australia, *Ptiloris paradisæa*, 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. Second only in interest to the discovery of this bird, would be an account of its habits and manners; and I trust Mr. Wallace will ere long enlighten us on these points. In the absence of this information, I would venture an opinion that it is partially a creeper in its habits; but whether it frequents the boles of the larger trees or the faces of rocky precipices is uncertain; neither do we know in what way the males display the plumes which spring out at right angles from the outer part of the shoulder: that the bird has the power of erecting and depressing them at will is without doubt. In the female they are entirely absent.

The male may be thus described:—

“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 silvery 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-plumes fine emerald-green, becoming very brilliant on the tips of the plumes; under surface brown, the 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; bill brownish horn-colour; feet yellow.

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.

The Plate represents one male of the natural size, and a second male and a female considerably reduced.