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Aegotheles Savesi Rediscovered?

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ficedulinus, flavissimus, flavus, floridanus, fuscicapilla (inv.), *gregarius, griseonota* (inv.)*, *griseotinctus, hainanus, halmaturinus, hypoxanthus, inornatus, intermedius, japonicus, kasaicus, luteus, luzonicus, maderaspatanus, majusculus, mauritianus, melanurus, minutus, modestus, montanus, nicobaricus, oblitus, olivaceus, obstinatus, oreophilus, pallidus, palpebrosus, perplexus, poliogastrus, rennellianus, semiflavus, silvanus, socotranus, splendidus, stenocricotus, strenuus, surdus, tephropleurus, ternatanus, tetiparius, ultimus, unicus, vellalavella* (inv.), *viridicatus, xanthochroa* (inv.).

* This name is not a latinized Greek adjective, but a noun phrase formed by a Latin adjective and a latinized Greek noun.

** This name is not a latinized Greek adjective, but a noun phrase formed by two latinized Greek nouns.

The New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar *Aegotheles savesi* rediscovered?

by Joe A. Tobias & Jonathan M. M. Ekstrom

Received 19 August 2001

In April 1880 a strange bird was caught after it flew through the open window of a house in the village of Tongué, at the foot of Mount Koghi in southern New Caledonia; the specimen was passed by M. Saves to E. L. Layard who described it as *Aegotheles savesi* (Layard & Layard 1881). The only other tangible evidence of the New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar are some fossilised bones discovered in Quaternary cave deposits c.65 km northwest of Nouméa, near Boulouparis (Balouet & Olson 1989), and a 1913 specimen held in Rome that went unnoticed until 1999 (C. Violani & C. M. Fisher *in litt.* 1999). Despite considerable attention focused on the forests of New Caledonia (Mayr 1941, 1945, Warner 1947, Delacour 1966, Stokes 1980, Létocart 1995, Maruia/CI 1998), no new records of the owlet-nightjar emerged, apart from a handful of unsubstantiated reports from the 1930s–1960s, three from southern New Caledonia and one from the Loyalty islands (Macmillan 1939, Ekstrom *et al.* 2000, *in press*). The species has thus long been presumed extinct by many authorities (e.g. King 1981). Given the mystery surrounding its status, ecology and taxonomy (Olson *et al.* 1987), its apparent rediscovery is of great interest.

We had conducted almost five months intensive fieldwork in New Caledonia when, at 1840 h on 5 November 1998, an unfamiliar bird looking like a large *Aegotheles* sp. flew across a disused logging road in the Rivière Ni valley on the western flank of the Massif de Kouakoué, Province Sud. By this time, the relatively depauperate avifauna of the islands was totally familiar to us, and thus the sudden appearance at dusk of an oddly shaped species came as a surprise, especially after so many weeks of striving and failing to encounter any night birds, apart from Barn

Owls *Tyto alba*. The sighting occurred in riverine humid forest on moderate slopes at c.1,000 m; a description of habitat in the immediate area is given by Ekstrom *et al.* (2000). After initial views, it was seen for several seconds in flight within the open canopy of large riverine trees where it soon disappeared, and was not seen perching. It then made brief sallies between perches on three more occasions. The bird appeared c.30 cm long with broad but quite short and rounded wings, and an ample tail; although largely silhouetted, it seemed uniformly very dark and definitely lacked pale patches in the wing. We were immediately confident that we had relocated *Aegotheles savesi*, the first indication of its continued survival for many decades. The distinctive shape and flight action distinguished it from the only possible confusion species, the endemic race of White-throated Nightjar *Eurostopodus mystacalis exul* (only known from a single specimen and probably a distinct species: Cleere 1998, S. Olson *in litt.* 1999).

As we can provide no photographic or tape-recorded evidence of our sighting, the identification deserves detailed comment. The frequent sallying behaviour observed during the short observation period is, as far as is known, not normal for *Aegotheles*. Those few members of this genus for which foraging details are available usually rest motionless on branches and occasionally sally out or hover-glean (Beehler *et al.* 1986, Cleere 1998, Holyoak 1999), although prolonged and frequent hawking over distances of < 30 m has previously been recorded in the Australian Owlet-nightjar *A. cristatus* (Holyoak 1999). Substantial differences in morphology imply that the New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar adopts different foraging strategies to its relatives (Olson *et al.* 1987). While longer legs and shorter wings suggest a less aerial and more terrestrial lifestyle, the foraging behaviour of the species is difficult to predict and presumably varies according to environmental factors such as food type and availability. Moreover, while *savesi* is apparently morphologically intermediate between *Aegotheles* and *Megaegotheles novaehollandiae*, an extinct and perhaps largely terrestrial taxon from New Zealand (Olson *et al.* 1987), the record of a bird in flight is not surprising given that the first specimen of *savesi* flew through a window.

Very few nocturnal birds occur on New Caledonia, a circumstance that facilitates the identification of those that are heard or observed. The only forest owl is the Barn Owl, a species very easily eliminated because of its size, colour and behaviour. Little is known of the habitat preferences and behaviour of the endemic owlet-nightjar and nightjar. Although it is more usual to observe true nightjars in flight rather than owlet-nightjars, there were obvious and striking differences that allowed immediate elimination of *E. m. exul*. The wing-beats were regular and fluttery, with the wings always held horizontally or slightly down-turned during occasional short glides. The shape and flight action suggested an outsized Australian Owlet-nightjar (although less fluttery), the only other species in the family with which the authors are familiar. It did not have the light buoyant flight of most nightjars, nor did it hold its wings in the v-shape so characteristic of many nightjar genera, including *Eurostopodus*, a group with which the observers are also familiar, having seen four of its constituent

TABLE 1
A comparison between wing formulae (mm from tip) of New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar *A. savesi* and White-throated Nightjar *E. m. mystacalis*.

Species	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
<i>A. savesi</i>	-47	-25	-11	-2	0	-3	-8	-17	-25	-34
<i>E. m. mystacalis</i>	-4	0	-6	-49	-79	-104	-115	-122	-133	–

species (including *mystacalis*) on numerous occasions. Most distinctively, the wings were conspicuously rounded. A glance at the wing formulas in Table 1 (comparing wing-tip shapes of the type specimen of *A. savesi* with a typical *E. m. mystacalis*) reveals that the former has very blunt and paddle-shaped wings, corresponding exactly to our observations, while the latter has highly tapered wings (unfortunately it was not possible to directly compare *savesi* with *E. m. exul*, but the wing shape of the latter is similar to *E. m. mystacalis*: N. Cleere *in litt.* 1998). Finally, the fact that it always flew or perched below the level of the upper canopy again points to the identification as an owlet-nightjar. Therefore, while all other birds occurring in New Caledonia can be swiftly eliminated, the features comfortably match those of an owlet-nightjar. We conclude that the bird involved was certainly neither an owl, nor a nightjar, and unless some similar species remains to be discovered in New Caledonia, it must have been *Aegotheles savesi*.

The bird was not seen or heard again, despite six hours of further searching in the same night, and five days and six nights of searching by several fieldworkers when we returned a week later. Although the lack of further records suggests that the individual observed did not hold a permanent territory in the immediate area, owlet-nightjars regularly shift roost-sites and are, in any case, notoriously difficult to observe in the field (Brigham & Geiser 1997, Holyoak 1999). Our single observation raises hopes that a population of this species can be conserved in New Caledonia, although its status, distribution and ecology remain unknown.

Acknowledgements
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New distributional bird records from Serranía de San Lucas and adjacent Central Cordillera of Colombia

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Serranía de San Lucas in northern Colombia has been one of the greatest ornithological enigmas in the Americas. One brief 1947 bird collection in the foothills was our only knowledge of the birds of this isolated mountain range. Political instability for over 40 years deterred further investigation until expeditions conducted by the Colombian Evaluation of Biodiversity in the Andes (EBA) Project team (the