

Acceptance of J. Mlíkovský's proposal to accept the spelling *Semeioptera wallacei* will simply result in zoologists using both names for some time into the future, as many workers who would not be aware of the decision of the Commission would use earlier reference sources, a situation not conducive to stability of nomenclature.

On the basis of the guidelines in the Preamble to the Code and in Article 79(c), we urge that the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature adopt the several points proposed by M. LeCroy in her original proposal.

### **Comment on the proposed suppression of *Rallus nigra* Miller, 1784 (Aves).**

(Case 2276; see BZN 40: 249–251 and 44: 126–128)

Michael P. Walters

*British Museum (Natural History), Tring, Hertfordshire HP23 6AP, U.K.*

I believe that *Rallus nigra* does not refer to the rail known as *R. tabuensis* (currently *Porzana tabuensis*), the Pacific spotless crake or sooty rail. I also believe that the original description on which the name *Rallus tabuensis* was based does not refer to the rail currently known by that name, but to the same species as *R. nigra*. Thus, ironically, Bruce et al. (BZN 40: 249–251) are right, but not for the reasons they think! It would clearly be most unfortunate if the now familiar name *tabuensis* had to be discarded in favour of a totally unknown name (*tahitiensis*), but I cannot see that invalidating *R. nigra* would do anything to solve the problem, and would only confuse the issue still further.

I have recently published a paper on the relationships of the species concerned (Walters, 1988). Basically, the situation is as follows:

1. The name *Rallus nigra* is known only from a plate by J. F. Miller, first published in his *Icon Animalium* of 1784 and, subsequently in 1796, in a revised edition of his work (called the *Cimelia Physica*), with an added interleaved text by George Shaw which was taken from Latham (see paragraph 3 below). Miller's plate may well have been copied and published with little alteration from an unpublished painting of a rail from Tahiti by Georg Forster, made on Cook's second voyage, which is housed in the British Museum (Natural History), no. 130. Lysaght (1956, p. 97) claimed that the bird depicted was the rail currently known as *Porzana tabuensis* (Gmelin, 1789), and proposed to substitute Miller's name for Gmelin's on the grounds of priority. However, the bird is clearly not *tabuensis* as now understood, as this has a very conspicuous brown mantle which is absent from both Miller's and Forster's plates. Peters (1934, p. 188, footnote) wrote: 'Miller's plate represents a wholly black rail somewhat larger than *tabuensis*; it cannot be identified with any of the known forms of *tabuensis* and possibly represents the bird later named *Porzana atra* (North, 1908) [from Henderson Island] or at least a bird closely allied to it'.

2. In addition to the two plates, there is a description by J. R. Forster (Georg Forster's father) written at the time of the voyage but not published until 1844, many years after the author's death. This description, in which Forster calls the bird *Rallus minutus*, was identified by Lichtenstein (1844, p. 178), the editor of the published account, as *Porzana tabuensis* and was clearly based on a specimen or specimens collected by the Forsters on their journey, and not on Georg's plate, with which it



disagrees on several points. I compared this description with specimens of *Porzana tabuensis* in the British Museum (Natural History) and consider it definitely refers to *tabuensis*. It seems likely, therefore, that the Forsters collected specimens (none now extant) of both *nigra* and *tabuensis* but failed to distinguish between them, J. R. Forster's description probably referring to *tabuensis* and Georg Forster's plate being based on a specimen of *nigra*.

3. Much of the past confusion regarding the two rails seems to have arisen from a failure to interpret correctly the significance of the two descriptions by Latham (1783, pp. 235 and 236) in his *General Synopsis of Birds* of his Tabuai rail and Tahiti (which he called Otaheite) rail, the origins respectively of Gmelin's 1789 *Rallus tabuensis* from Tongatabu, Tahiti and the neighbouring islands, and *R. tahitiensis* from Tahiti and the Friendly Isles. Although Wilesworth (1892, pp. 60 and 61) separated *tahitiensis* from *tabuensis*, nearly all writers have correctly realised that there is no difference between the populations of the rail now called *tabuensis* occurring on the islands of Tonga and Tahiti, but have therefore regarded *tahitiensis* as a synonym of *tabuensis* in the mistaken belief that Latham had separated the two populations. In fact, he did no such thing. According to his accounts, both rails occurred on both islands. Furthermore, his descriptions must refer to two different species. The sooty rail is indicated by his description of the Tahiti rail, while his Tabuai rail accords reasonably well with Miller's rail. Latham probably described his Tabuai rail from Georg Forster's plate and the Tahiti rail from specimens collected on Cook's third voyage (Medway, 1979, p. 332).

4. It seems likely that the Tahiti rail *Rallus tahitiensis* Gmelin, 1789 and *R. minutus* of J. R. Forster's description represent the rail now known as *Porzana tabuensis* and in the interests of nomenclatural stability it would be unfortunate if the name were now altered. Probably Miller's *Rallus nigra*, Latham's Tabuai rail, Gmelin's 1789 *Rallus tabuensis* and Georg Forster's plate all represent another species, now extinct, related to *Nesophylax ater* of Henderson Island. As Miller's name is the oldest, the extinct bird is best called *Nesophylax niger*. Olson & Steadman (BZN 44: 126–128) have previously suggested that the name *R. nigra* might well represent a taxon distinct from *tabuensis*, possibly an extinct form of *Porzana atra* (currently *Nesophylax ater*) from Henderson Island.

5. In the interests of stability of nomenclature I designate a neotype for *Rallus tabuensis*, as presently understood for the spotless crake or sooty rail. It is specimen no. 1893.7.8.3 in the collections of the British Museum (Natural History) and was collected by Andrew Garrett on Huahine, one of the Society Islands.

#### Additional References

- Forster, J. R.** 1844. (Lichtenstein, H. Ed.) *Descriptiones Animalium*. xiii, 425 pp. Officina Academica, Berolini.
- Latham, J.** 1785. *A General Synopsis of Birds*. Vol. 3, part 1. iii, 328 pp. Leigh & Sotheby, London.
- Medway, D. G.** 1979. Some ornithological results of Cook's third voyage. *Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History*, 9(3): 315–351.
- Walters, M. P.** 1988. Probable validity of *Rallus nigra* Miller, an extinct species from Tahiti. *Nocturnis*, 35: 265–269.
- Wilesworth, L. W.** 1892. Aves Polynesia. A Catalogue of the Birds of the Polynesian Subregion (not including the Sandwich Islands). *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Königlichen Zoologischen und Anthropologisch-Ethnographischen Museums zu Dresden 1890–91*, 6: 1–92.



Walters, Michael. 1989. "Comment On The Proposed Suppression Of Rallus Nigra Miller, 1784 (Aves)." *The Bulletin of zoological nomenclature* 46, 50–51.  
<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.part.483>.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/44487>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.part.483>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/483>

#### **Holding Institution**

Natural History Museum Library, London

#### **Sponsored by**

Natural History Museum Library, London

#### **Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder.

Rights Holder: International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Rights: <https://biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.