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The ornithology of the Baudin expedition (1800-1804)

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Citation

Jansen, J. J. F. J. (2018, May 22). *The ornithology of the Baudin expedition (1800-1804)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/62332>

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Cover Page



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Date: 2018-05-22

General introduction

Large parts of Australia were still uncharted territory in the late 18th century. The south coast was as yet unexplored and Tasmania was still a part of New South Wales. The settlements were confined to the area now known as Greater Sydney, with 11,370 civilians living there in 1802. The native birds of Australia were mainly known from 'The Watling drawings' and 'The Lambert drawings' and their scientific descriptions by John Latham. These were exciting times for the exploration of the 'great unknown'.

The oldest collection of bird specimens that still exists today dates from the second Cook expedition to the southern hemisphere (1772-1775). From earlier periods, only the odd specimens have survived, mostly due to bad preservation techniques. The second Cook expedition signalled the start of a new era in bird collecting: from the return of this expedition in 1775 onwards, we find for some expeditions double figures of surviving specimens that lasted until today.

Until the French commander Nicolas-Thomas Baudin's first visit in 1801, Timor and large parts of Australia were uncharted territory as far as European natural history was concerned, even though Timor had been part of the Dutch colonies since the middle of the 17th century and Australia had had a permanent settlement since 1788. Thus, it must have been amazing for the crew of the Baudin expedition to walk the pristine shores of New Holland and observe the exotic flora and fauna, after months of battling the seas, bad food and diseases. The voyage's toll on the crew was heavy and many crew members deserted the expedition or died. However, fantastic specimens were the crew's reward when they landed on these foreign shores during the pioneering era of natural history exploration. What is more, collecting and preserving having been brought to near perfection through improved methods of conservation, the collected specimens became available for study in Europe.

The government-funded Baudin expedition took place between 1800 and 1804. The French Revolution had just ended and Napoléon I had overthrown the French Directory on 9 November 1799, replacing it with the French Consulate. Napoléon I agreed to fund the Baudin expedition five months later, on 7 April 1800. The instructions for the expedition included the detailed exploration of the south-eastern, western and northern coasts of New Holland. The other countries visited during the expedition (e.g. Tenerife, Mauritius, Timor and South Africa) were planned as provisional landings or part of an alternative plan. The expedition started with two ships that carried 200 crew members, including an impressive contingent of 22 naturalists and assistants appointed by the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris. Although not all the objectives for mapping parts of Australia were met, no vessel was lost. The expedition brought back a rumoured 100,000 specimens including an unrivalled collection of live mammals and botanical specimens.

The 1,055 ornithological specimens were stored eventually in the Paris museum, but they were not systematically catalogued by the curators, nor was their value appreciated, and part of the collection became dispersed. The effects of the Napoleonic Wars, personal rivalries, the death of Baudin before the end of the expedition and the difficulties involved in tracing and gaining access to the specimens have all contributed to the expedition's exploits remaining largely invisible since their arrival in Europe. As a result, the ornithological collection has never been studied integrally.

Despite the expedition's success in bringing back so many specimens, mapping large parts of Australia and describing what was encountered, Baudin did not make it to the hall of fame of great explorers. No statue exists in France, although there are several places named after him in Australia. He is commemorated in the names of only a few of the natural history

items collected while he was commander of the expedition: Baudin's Treefrog *Smilisca baudinii* (Duméril & Bibron 1841), Long-billed Black Cockatoo *Zanda baudinii* (Lear 1832), Baudin's Sea-lavender *Limonium australe* var. *baudinii* (Linczevski 1986), Baudin's Marsh Saltbush *Atriplex paludosa* subsp. *Baudinii* (Moquin-Tandon 1849) and *Zanlea baudini* (Gershwin & Zeidler 2003).

The key questions behind the research for this dissertation are: 1) to establish the documentation of specimens; 2) to trace the whereabouts of the expedition's specimens; 3) to catalogue the birds found during the expedition and 4) to establish the ornithological heritage of the 1800-1804 Baudin expedition. There are a number of gaps in our knowledge of the Baudin expedition and these developed into additional research questions such as 'What were the original collecting localities, who were the original collectors and what were their aims?' 'Where were specimens acquired and by whom, how many specimens were brought back and who played a role in the taxidermy process?' 'How were specimens dispersed and if so, where did they end up and do they still survive today and what can the Baudin specimens add to the modern understanding of biodiversity and taxonomy?' Supplementary research was also undertaken, to ascertain whether some of the problems encountered during research for this dissertation were more widespread. This has resulted in several other publications which are not included in this dissertation.