

THE CONTRIBUTION OF GILBERT TIRANT TO INDOCHINESE ORNITHOLOGY

by

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The avifauna of the eastern and southern parts of the Indo-chinese Peninsula (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) had remained very little known, compared to the western part (Burma), until the beginning of the present century. Only local, and often casual, collecting had been done when **Robinson** and **Kloss**, who were based in Malaya, ventured north and investigated the fauna of the southern plateau of Lang Biang and of parts of Thailand. Soon afterwards other trained naturalists started working in the area, among them, in Thailand, the late Count **Gyldenstolpe** and Mr. **R.M. de Schauensee**. It was my luck to explore in some detail between 1923-1939 what was then known as French Indochina. With the help of my late friends **P. Jabouille**, **P. Engelbach**, **A. David-Beaulieu**, and of Mr. **J. C. Greenway**, we collected some 50,000 specimens of birds as well as extensive data, so that a comprehensive study of that wonderful avifauna could be undertaken. Our taxonomic and faunal work for Indochina was duplicated for Thailand by that of **Herbert Deignan**. We first met at the British Museum, London, in the nineteen-twenties, and having the same interests, we soon became close friends, cooperating constantly along the years. Being younger, he should have survived me, and his loss has affected me deeply. I welcome this opportunity to evoke his memory and to express my high regard for his person and for his work.

Among the few early important contributors to the knowledge of Indochinese birds, the work of Dr. **Gilbert Tirant** stands prominently. Outside of various papers by **Verreaux** and **Oustalet**, the ornithologists of the Paris Museum, his was then the only important study of the birds of a part of that country. He wrote in 1878 "Les Oiseaux de la Basse-Cochinchine," which was published in 1879 in the *Bulletin de Comité Agricole de la Cochinchine*, ser. 3,

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I, pp. 73-1740. It was based on over 1,000 specimens collected by him between 1875 and 1877 in that part of Indochina, and on his own observations in the field. Considering that he was not a professional zoologist, his list is remarkably accurate, and it still stands as the base of our ornithological knowledge of that region, the more so as it has since been much altered by human interference and exploitation. A number of the species he then found have become either extinct or very rare, due to destruction of their habitat. His nomenclature was good for those days, if it is now partly out of date. Difficulties in identifying his records are very few, but there are numerous misprints. Even his own name has been wrongly spelled on the title page "Tirant". The work, in fact, is so good that the Basse-Cochinchine has been since somewhat neglected by modern collectors, including ourselves. A flat country of large marshes and huge forests, now greatly altered by cultivation, it possesses very few rare or endemic species, almost all being widespread through similar regions of the Indochinese Peninsula and of Malaya. The most interesting records in Tirant's list are those of several Malayan forms not found in other parts of French Indochina. Some have never been met with since. But the accuracy of such records have, for most of them, been checked on the specimens he collected, now deposited in the Natural History Museum at Lyon, France, or in Paris.

Going through Tirant's list, some commentaries are called for. We will use his numbers and names, giving when necessary those used at present for an easier identification.

5. *Nisaetus fasciatus*

Tirant's record long remained unique, but Bonelli's Eagle has since been found in December 1939 at Xieng Khouang, Laos, by A. David-Beaulieu. Probably a rare winter migrant.

7. *Haliaeetus fulviventris* (= *leucorhynchus*)

Also very rare, but there is in the Paris Museum a specimen procured by Harmand in Cambodia; also probably a winter visitor.

16. *Circaetus gallicus*

Tirant mentions the present species as recorded by **Jouan** from Chau-doc, but he has never found it. There has been a record since; it is a very rare winter visitor.

38. *Palaeornis torquatus* (= *Psittacula krameri*)

The most doubtful record of the list. **Tirant** reports that it is as common as the larger *P. eupatria* without mentioning specimens taken. There are no specimens in the Paris or Lyon Museums, and the species has never been found east of Burma. It is therefore most probably an incorrect record. Such a common, almost domestic bird could not have been overlooked by ornithologists since 1879.

41. *Palaeornis* (= *Psittacula*) *longicauda*

Tirant states that he saw only one specimen at Tra-vinh, and **Germain** has also recorded it. But it has not been found recently in Cochinchina.

43. *Psittinus incertus* (= *cyanurus*)

Tirant writes that he has collected several at Srok Kranh, all males. Never been found since, but most probably a good record.

98. *Calyptomena viridis*

Tirant states that he found it at Trasang. No later record.

103. *Berenicornis comatus*104. *Anthracoceros malayanus*

Tirant mentions that heads of these hornbills had been brought to him by Annamites. Another record of the first species from Camlo seems to be incorrect. It is therefore doubtful that these two Malayan species really occur in Indochina.

106. *Arachnothera modesta* (= *A. affinis modesta*)

107. *A. chrysogenys*

107. *A. flavigastra* (= *flavigaster*)

Three Malayan species commonly found by **Tirant** in the coconut and banana plantations of southern Cochinchina, but never farther north. There is no reason to doubt his records.

112. *Chalcostetha insignis* (= *Nectarinia chalcostetha*)

Tirant records a single specimen (Tra-vinh); another one has been collected by **Engelbach** in the mangrove on the coast of Cambodia.

116. *Dicaeum trigonostigma*

Found fairly common by **Tirant**. No recent record.

118. *Anaimos thoracicus* (= *Prionochilus thoracicus*)

One collected by **Tirant** at Tudaumot. Never found since.

140. *Monarcha pyrrhoptera* (= *Philentoma pyrrhopterum*)

Found by **Tirant** at Tayninh and Thudaumot. Not recorded since.

159. *Phyllornis icterocephalus*

160. *P. chlorocephalus* (= *Chloropsis cochinchinensis* Subsp.)

These two subspecies occur in Indochina, but it is doubtful that **Tirant** obtained both of them.

162. *Iora* (= *Aegithina*) *viridissima*

Often collected by **Tirant**, but no recent record.

187. *Mixornis gularis*

It is possible that **Tirant** has found *Macronus flavicollis* in Cochinchina.

196. *Orthotomus cineracea* (= *O. ruficeps*)

Tirant records it as very common at Thudaumot. Not recently found.

221. *Passer indicus* (*P. domesticus indicus*)

Probably an incorrect listing. The species does not occur in Indochina, where it is replaced by *P. montanus*.

227. *Estrela flaviventris* (= *Estrilda amandava*)
The Cochinchinese subspecies is *punicea*.
237. *Colornis chalyboeus* (= *Aplonis panayensis strigatus*)
Tirant reports seeing it at Basé. A doubtful record.
240. *Corone insolens* (= *Corvus splendens insolens*)
Not a proper record. The species does not occur in Indochina.
251. *Sphenocercus korthalsi* (= *Treron seimundi modestus*)
Korthalsi is no doubt a misidentification.
253. *Columba intermedia*
The Rock Pigeon (*livia*) does not occur in Indochina in the wild state.
281. *Ardea sumatrana*
Tirant's record from Cochinchina is validated by the occurrence of the species on the Cambodian coast confirmed by **Engelbach**.
290. *Ardeola grayi* (= *A. speciosa*)
Cochinchinese specimens are definitely *speciosa*.
345. *Gygis candida* (= *G. alba monte*)
An unsubstantiated record.

It is easy to conclude from the above remarks that, with a few exceptions, **Tirant's** records can be considered sound, even some of species never found since. Changes in habitat or lack of collecting in certain areas may be considered good reasons for their absence in later lists. All others have been validated by more recent records and can be safely accepted, and "Les Oiseaux de la Basse-Cochinchine," constitutes the best avifaunal list of an Indochinese region published in the XIX century.

