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Comments on the taxonomic status and disappearance of *Mimocichla rubripes eremita* Ridgway, 1905, with a substitute name, and notes on the type material of *M. coryi* Sharpe, 1902

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SUMMARY.—A population of the West Indian endemic Red-legged Thrush *Turdus plumbeus* formerly inhabited the Swan Islands (off northern Honduras), but is apparently extinct, having first and last been seen in 1887. Named *Mimocichla rubripes eremita* Ridgway, 1905, it fell into the synonymy of *T. p. rubripes*, found across the western two-thirds of Cuba. A recent check on seven Swan Islands specimens suggests that the validity of their subspecific status might be upheld for their apparently more extensive black throat, but further study is needed. The extinction of the population cannot be explained, but economic activity in the years from the 1850s to 1900s conceivably played a part. Meanwhile, Tristan Thrush *Nesocichla eremita* Gould, 1855, endemic to the archipelago of Tristan da Cunha, is nowadays also reassigned to *Turdus*. To resolve the resultant case of secondary homonymy, a substitute name for the Swan Islands population of *Turdus plumbeus* is offered.

‘The mystery surrounding the occurrence of this species in the Swan Islands has never been satisfactorily solved’ (Monroe 1968: 304)

The West Indian endemic Red-legged Thrush *Turdus plumbeus* (*sensu lato*) was long placed in the genus *Mimocichla* P. L. Sclater, 1859, on account of a handful of morphological characters, namely more rounded tail with white tips to the outer rectrices, pale-edged secondaries and wing-coverts, more slender bill, and short rectal bristles (Seeböhm 1881). Molecular studies, however, have confirmed the species’ placement in *Turdus* Linnaeus, 1758, with its closest living relative apparently being the Jamaican endemic White-chinned Thrush *T. aurantius* (Voelker *et al.* 2007, Nylander *et al.* 2008). As a result, all four avian global checklists currently treat Red-legged Thrush in *Turdus* (Dickinson & Christidis 2014, del Hoyo & Collar 2016, Clements *et al.* 2022, Gill *et al.* 2022). The species is generally accepted to comprise six subspecies (Collar 2005), divided into western and eastern groups, the former in the northern Bahamas, Cuba and Cayman Brac (four subspecies), and the latter on Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Dominica (two subspecies) (AOU 1998). More recently, however, given reasonably pronounced morphological variation and a deep genetic split between populations on Cuba and Hispaniola (Ricklefs & Bermingham 2008), some authorities have preferred to treat the complex as comprising three species: (1) *T. plumbeus* in the Bahamas; (2) *T. rubripes* in Cuba plus Cayman Brac; and (3) *T. ardosiaceus* on Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Dominica (del Hoyo & Collar 2016, Kirwan *et al.* 2019).

Largely overlooked, however, is a series of specimens, mostly males, collected by C. H. Townsend between 4 February and 25 May 1887 on the Swan Islands, c.200 km off

Honduras and 325 km south-west of Grand Cayman (but still part of the West Indies faunal region, *contra* Raffaele *et al.* 1998) (Bond 1940, Monroe 1968, Kirwan *et al.* 2019). Townsend was not present throughout this period on the Swan Islands, as he visited Grand Cayman twice during it (15–16 March and 15–17 May 1887) (Ridgway 1887, Bradley 2000: 21). His material is held at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (USNM), including the adult male holotype (USNM 111219) (Deignan 1961), as well as at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge, MA (MCZ) (Ridgway 1905, Monroe 1968) and the Senckenberg Naturmuseum, Frankfurt am Main (SMF). Monroe (1968: 304) stated that there were ten specimens, eight males and two unsexed, of which nine were at USNM and one (a male) at MCZ; Ridgway (1887: 575) also reported that Townsend collected ‘ten adults’ and Paynter (1956: 106) too mentioned the same figure but not their whereabouts. However, Ridgway (1907: 85) later specified that he had measured just seven specimens, which accords with the number seen by us at USNM (see below) and the total recorded in the Smithsonian Institution’s online database (<https://collections.nmnh.si.edu/search/birds/>). C. Milensky (*in litt.* 2023) reports that nine specimens were originally registered in USNM of which one, a male (as indicated by Monroe 1968), went to MCZ, and one, also male, was used in an exchange with Graf von Berlepsch. J. Trimble (*in litt.* 2023) confirms that a single male *Turdus plumbeus* from the Swan Islands is held at MCZ (MCZ.ORN.81102; formerly USNM 111225). The specimen (formerly USNM 112257) sent to Berlepsch, who bequeathed his 55,000 bird specimens to SMF (Roselaar 2003), is listed on the institution’s online database, registered as SMF 17384 (an adult male taken on 25 May 1887), but the database also documents a second specimen from the original series, SMF 17385 (an adult collected 6 March 1887; formerly USNM 111227). G. Mayr (*in litt.* 2023) confirms the presence of both specimens in the collection, and that SMF 17385 is unsexed. Thus Ridgway (1887) and Monroe (1968) were correct to report that there are ten specimens of this taxon. However, the other reportedly unsexed bird could only be USNM 111223, which in the USNM catalogue is registered as male (see below), so it is possible that nine of the ten specimens were male rather than eight.

Ridgway (1887) was initially unable to distinguish these Swan Island birds from Cuban specimens, but later determined that they differ from *rubripes* (the subspecies of Red-legged Thrush in western and central Cuba) in averaging larger and having shorter toes and more extensive white on the chin and malar area; consequently he recognised them as constituting a distinct taxon that he named *Mimocichla rubripes eremita* (Ridgway 1905, 1907).

During a stay of three weeks on the Swan Islands in January–February 1908, Lowe (1909) was unable to find the species. He speculated that the Red-legged Thrush was only a non-breeding visitor during the boreal winter and therefore questioned the taxonomic status of *eremita*. Hellmayr (1934), however, maintained it as valid, and the fact that Townsend collected a specimen as late as 25 May argues against Lowe’s hypothesis; moreover, there is no evidence that *Turdus plumbeus* makes regular cold-season movements of any sort, with fewer than a handful of reports that can be ascribed to (exclusively short-distance) vagrancy (Kirwan *et al.* 2019, Kirkconnell *et al.* 2020, Larsen 2020). Rather more plausibly, Paynter (1956) made the case for synonymising *eremita* on the grounds that it might have colonised the islands via hurricane-mediated dispersal and been extirpated due to ‘disturbance of the forest’. After Paynter, *eremita* was also listed in synonymy by Ripley (1964) and Monroe (1968). Throughout the last century, however, nobody disputed that the bird itself had been lost: of six post-Lowe ornithologist visitors listed by Paynter (1956) and Monroe (1968)—George Nelson in February–March and July 1912 and April 1913, Neal Wilson between September 1926 and April 1927, A. K.

Fisher in April 1929, Jean Delacour in October 1937, Rudyerd Boulton in January 1940, and Charles H. Blake in November 1958—none found Red-legged Thrush on the Swan Islands. In a survey of subsequent, largely unpublished visits, Kirwan *et al.* (2019) were unable to discover any modern sightings of Red-legged Thrush on the islands. Even its one-time occurrence there has not been consistently mentioned or accepted in recent specialist monographs and regional works. For example, Clement & Hathway (2000) stated only that subspecies *rubripes* ‘possibly [occurred] formerly on the Swan Islands’, while Raffaele *et al.* (1998) omitted all mention of the Swan Islands in the species’ range. (Although the last-named authors did not consider these islands to be part of the West Indies region, they nevertheless mentioned other ‘important’ Swan Islands’ populations, e.g., of Vitelline Warbler *Setophaga vitellina*.)

In May 2019, at GMK’s request and in ignorance of Ridgway’s original diagnosis, NJC examined and measured the specimens of *eremita* in the USNM 111219–111226 (*n* = 7, of which six are labelled as male and one, USNM 111223, is unsexed, this latter being included in the measured sample as it nests within it; the USNM register has it as male *fide* C. Milensky *in litt.* 2023) and compared them with the 18 male Red-legged Thrushes (taxon *rubripes*) in the same institution (Table 1). The claws were not measured, a difference in the white on chin and malar was not noticed (and is not apparent in Fig. 1), and a significantly larger size in *eremita* was not upheld. The only character that emerged as potentially diagnostic of Swan Islands birds was their apparently greater extent of black on the throat, although a slightly larger bill was also intimated (Table 1, Fig. 1). A difference in the size of an area of colour on the upper underparts of bird specimens is difficult to measure with any accuracy and may simply be attributable to preparation style, particularly in relation to how the head is positioned. In this case, however, the larger throat patch appears reasonably well supported (mean length 43.0 vs. 32.9 mm) and, with an effect size of 2.7, represents a medium character under the Tobias *et al.* (2010) criteria, thus potentially rendering *eremita* worthy of recognition, which we very tentatively give it. Independent scrutiny of all specimens of *eremita* would be a helpful step to resolve this uncertainty, while molecular work might establish the biogeographic origin of the Swan Islands’ birds as well as their level of genetic differentiation from other taxa.

Also bearing on this case is the fact that the synonymising of *eremita* with *rubripes*, readily accepted by all authorities after (but not including) Hellmayr (1934), produces an anomalous leapfrog arrangement involving the geographically intermediate subspecies *coryi* of Cayman Brac. While inspecting material of *Turdus plumbeus* in the Natural History Museum, Tring (NHMUK), GMK found five examples of *coryi* which proved to be the

TABLE 1
Biometric data (mean, standard deviation and range) for specimens in the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, of *Turdus plumbeus eremita* and *T. p. rubripes*; all specimens used were labelled as males except USNM 111223, unsexed (but registered as male and within the mensural ranges of the labelled males). Measurements were taken with digital callipers accurate to 0.01 mm for bill (skull to tip), tarsus (tarsometatarsus from back of intertarsal joint to distal side of the joint-covering scute at the base of the longest toe), wing (curved), tail (from point of insertion to tip) and the extent of the black throat (from uppermost point on the lower chin to the lowest point on the upper breast).

	<i>n</i>	Bill	Tarsus	Wing	Tail	Throat
<i>T. p. eremita</i>	7	27.1 ± 0.9 26.1–28.9	36.4 ± 0.5 36–37	126.0 ± 3.5 120–129	114.0 ± 4.0 110–122	43.0 ± 3.6 38–49
<i>T. p. rubripes</i>	18	25.9 ± 1.5 22.5–27.3	36.5 ± 2.1 29–38	123.0 ± 4.1 114–128	111.0 ± 4.7 103–118	32.9 ± 3.9 25–40



Figure 1. Two randomly selected specimens of *Turdus plumbeus eremita* (left) and *T. p. rubripes* (right) in the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, showing the slightly larger black area on the throat of *eremita* (N. J. Collar)

specimens used by Sharpe (1902) to describe the taxon¹, but which had gone unnoticed by Warren & Harrison (1971). Alongside specimens of *rubripes*, these five birds stand out by their larger bills (three adult males average 30.2 mm; cf. Table 1) and darker but more restricted cinnamon-chestnut bellies. Both these characters were noted by Ridgway (1907), and the belly difference was reported by Sharpe (1902), but other proffered diagnostic features are arguable and need a greater sample size. Nevertheless, the evident validity of *coryi* inevitably diminishes the likelihood that birds on the Swan Islands were consubspecific with birds on Cuba. Moreover, animal endemism in the Swan Islands is seemingly well established, involving a hutia *Geocapromys thoracatus* (IUCN status Extinct: Turvey & Helgen 2018), a snake *Cubophis brooksi* (Critically Endangered: Townsend 2021), a gecko

¹ Sharpe (1902: 214) described 'Cory's Grey Thrush' from 'three adults and one young bird' sent to F. D. Godman by C. B. Cory and 'collected by Mr. C. J. Maynard'. However, the *Tring coryi* comprise five specimens, four adults (one with perhaps some very slight traces of immaturity on the crown and nape) and one young individual, of which the last was collected by C. P. Streator on 4 August 1888, not by Maynard, who was responsible for acquiring the other four in early April of the same year. (Bradley 2000: 20 reported Streator's dates in Cayman as 6 June to 3 August 1888, but his thrush is clearly dated 4th.) All were accessioned together, being registered as [NHMUK] 1891.1.25.21–25. That Sharpe had access to Streator's specimen is clearly evidenced by his mentioning features unique to it among the *Tring* series: 'triangular spots of orange at the end of the wing-coverts; the black throat-patch of the adults is represented by a mass of triangular black spots, extending to the base of the chin...the grey feathers of the underparts have black bars at the ends with a subterminal wash of cinnamon' (Figs. 2–3). In light of any evidence to the contrary, we consider that the most likely reason for the discrepancy in the number of specimens is a mere slip of the pen on Sharpe's part, and that all five individuals should be treated as syntypes of *Mimocichla coryi*.



Figures 2–3. Syntypes of *Turdus plumbeus coryi* held at the Natural History Museum, Tring, in lateral and ventral views, from top to bottom and left to right, respectively, NHMUK 1891.1.25.21 (male), 1891.1.25.23 (male), 1891.1.25.25 (female), 1891.1.25.22 (male), and 1891.1.25.24 (immature male); all but the last-mentioned specimen (collected by C. P. Streater on 4 August 1888) were taken by Charles J. Maynard between 3 and 9 April 1888 (G. M. Kirwan, © Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London)

Aristelliger nelsoni (Endangered: Townsend & Powell 2019), two lizards *Sphaerodactylus exsul* and *Norops nelsoni* (McCranie *et al.* 2017) and the Swan Islands Vitelline Warbler *Setophaga vitellina nelsoni* (Kirwan *et al.* 2019). These facts establish nothing, but they increase the plausibility of *eremita* being valid.

What caused the disappearance of the thrush from the Swan Islands must remain a matter of conjecture. The extinction and endangerment of the hutia and reptiles result from causes in the past half-century or so, whereas the thrush was uniquely recorded 136 years ago, in 1887. The only hints stem from an informal outline of the islands and their history by Weigel (1973). Occasional hurricanes, which he was unable to document before the 20th century, may have been pivotal. However, he also mentioned that a commercial guano company began operating in 1858, leading to 'large deposits of guano [being] mined from the island[s] in the late 1800's', and that in the early 1900s part of Great (or Big) Swan Island was leased for the planting of coconuts. Either or both of these enterprises might have impacted the wildlife of the islands, by removing areas of habitat or introducing alien species. The striking sex ratio bias towards males in the specimen sample (eight or nine of Townsend's original ten specimens were males and none was recorded as female; see above) reflects a common circumstance in declining and near-terminal insular populations, with two explanations potentially fitting the Swan Island case: first, greater female dispersal taking them into disadvantageous habitat if forest has been replaced by secondary formations, and, second, disproportionate predation of incubating females by alien predators (Donald 2007). Cats and rats are present now *vide* McCranie *et al.* (2017), but when they became established is not known. The fact that Townsend collected birds over a matter of months in 1887 (singles on 4, 17 and 19 February, four on 6 March, singles on 26 March, 14 April and 25 May: C. Milensky *in litt.* 2023, G. Mayr *in litt.* 2023) hints at their relative scarcity at the time.

Meanwhile, the loss of the taxon as a living entity has to be matched by the loss of its original name. *Nesocichla eremita* Gould, 1855, endemic to the Tristan da Cunha archipelago (Tristan da Cunha, Inaccessible and Nightingale Islands), was described on the basis of an adult collected by John MacGillivray (1821–67) during the voyage of *HMS Herald* in the second half of 1852 (Warren & Harrison 1971; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Herald_\(1824\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Herald_(1824))). The holotype, NHMUK 1856.10.14.9, is held at the Natural History Museum, Tring (Warren & Harrison 1971). The genus *Nesocichla* Gould, 1855, was long maintained on the basis of its small rounded wings, large bill, and fairly long sturdy legs and feet (e.g., Rand 1955, Ripley 1964, Clement & Hathway 2000, Collar 2005), but multiple more recent genetic studies have agreed that the Tristan Thrush is nested within *Turdus* (Klicka *et al.* 2005, Voelker *et al.* 2007, Nylander *et al.* 2008), an arrangement which, like the subsuming of *Mimocichla*, is accepted by all the major global checklists of birds.

The current treatment of both *Nesocichla eremita* Gould, 1855, and *Mimocichla rubripes eremita* Ridgway, 1905, in *Turdus* results in an issue of secondary homonymy under which the latter, junior name is invalidated (ICZN 1999, Art. 53.3, 57.3, 59.1)². Because Ridgway's nomen lacks any junior synonyms it requires a new substitute name (Art. 60.3), which we expressly offer according to the provisions of Art. 13.1.3 and 16.1:

² An even earlier incarnation of *eremita* in this genus, *Turdus eremita* J. F. Gmelin, 1789, is now a synonym of *Monticola solitarius philippensis* (Seeböhm 1881). In contrast to the case at the heart of this paper, *Turdus eremita* (Gould, 1855) should not be rejected in favour of Gmelin's nomen because these two names are no longer considered congeneric and secondary homonymy no longer exists (see Art. 59.2).

Turdus plumbeus perditus, **nom. nov.**

Etymology.—The new name is a reference to the taxon's evident extinction. The Latin *perditus* meaning lost or abandoned is derived from *perdere* to lose and is masculine, in agreement with the genus name (Art. 31.2).

Holotype.—This is the same as for Ridgway's original nomen (Recommendation 60A), namely the adult male collected on 4 February 1887 by C. H. Townsend at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (USNM 111219).

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