

## **BFA SEMINAR SERIES No. 37**

### **François Levaillant – 18<sup>th</sup> Century Ornithologist**

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The oldest extant bird specimens in European museums were collected by François Levaillant (1753–1824), a Frenchman who travelled in the Dutch colony at the Cape of Good Hope in the period 1781–1784. He made two journeys: one to the east, reaching the Great Fish River and returning through the Karoo, and one to the north, reaching the Orange River. In between he explored around Cape Town. Altogether it is said that he collected about 2000 specimens of birds, as well as others such as mammals, insects, plants, and Hottentot artefacts. He was able to sojourn in the Cape as a "foreigner" because he was under the sponsorship of Jacob Temminck, treasurer of the Dutch East India Company.

Back in France, Levaillant published the account of his first (eastwards) journey in 1790, with the permission of King Louis XVI, and his second (northwards) journey in 1795, one year after the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror. In both *Voyages*, he claimed to have, firstly, crossed the Great Fish River and travelled in Caffraria and, secondly, crossed the Orange River and travelled very extensively in what is now Namibia. These extra journeys are considered to be untrue, and were so considered already within a few years after publication of his books.

In 1796 Levaillant began the publication of his great work, *Histoire naturelle des Oiseaux d'Afrique* in six volumes, continuing in parts until 1810. There were 300 plates depicting 284 different types of birds. Each plate was accompanied by up to seven pages of text, in the folio edition. This text has never been translated into English, except for excerpts by the editors of the *London Encyclopaedia*. Within 50 years, Carl Sundevall of the Stockholm Museum made a critical review of the book, in both Swedish and Latin, and demonstrated that the list of species included 50 that Levaillant claimed to have collected during his travels but which in fact did not occur in the Cape (most did not even occur in Africa!). In addition there were 10 birds that were unidentifiable, and another 10 that were 'fabricated' or composite birds. These 70 types have hitherto ruined Levaillant's reputation.

However, he also published another six volumes in four titles (1801–1818), none of which has aroused the controversy that his so-called African volumes did. In total he produced 16 books, virtually from the beginning of the French Revolution through to the aftermath of the Napoleonic era. Could there have been a more tumultuous period in which to publish beautiful books? Added to that, Levaillant had three wives – the first divorcing him under the Revolution's new law as Divorce no. 418 – and 10 children, three of whom were illegitimate. Domestically, his life was tumultuous too!

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of interesting material in the African volumes. And not just because he collected many species hitherto unknown to science – but later scientifically named by other people, for example François-Marie Daudin. One example is the Bateleur Eagle, named as a 'juggler' by Levaillant. One must not throw out the baby of historical fact with the bath water of imaginative fiction! There were two keys to Levaillant's success. He had been given the new taxidermy formula by Jean-Baptiste Becoeur before the latter died in 1777: it was an arsenical soap. No one else had the recipe for another 20 years. Secondly, he

could take advantage of French improvements to the flintlock mechanism on the musket, and could no doubt fire quicker and perhaps straighter with the improved gun, obviously necessary for shooting birds.

Our new book on François Levillant and his exploits at the southern tip of Africa, and later in France, deals with 58 paintings which are reproduced with modern techniques and are identical to the original watercolour paintings. The French text that accompanies these plates (birds of prey, owls, and some shrikes) is fully translated, and a modern commentary is offered on each species. Other chapters describe his two journeys and his life and times from birth in Dutch Guiana (Surinam) to his death. In the view of the authors, Levillant is seen as an energetic naturalist of serious intent, and a pioneer. His peccadillos, and even sins, are overwhelmed by the weight and abundance of his achievements. We regard him as the "founder of African ornithology".

#### Reference

Rookmaaker, L.C., Mundy, P.J., Glenn, I.E. & Spary, E.C. (2004). *François Levillant and the Birds of Africa*. Brenthurst Press, Johannesburg. 484 pp. ISBN 0-909079-59-5.