

TALEGALLA LATHAMI.

Wattled Talegalla.

New Holland Vulture, Lath. Gen. Hist., vol. i. p. 32.

Genus Alectura, Ibid, vol. x. p. 455.

Alectura Lathamii, Gray, Zool. Misc., No. I. p. 3. Jard. and Selby, Ill. Orn., vol. iii. pl. cxi.

New Holland Vulture, Swains. Class of Birds, vol. i. p. 383.

Catheturus Australis, Ibid, vol. ii. p. 206.

Meleagris Lindesayii, Jameson, Mem. Wern. Nat. Hist. Soc., vol. vii. p. 473.

Brush Turkey of the Colonists; *Wee-lah*, Aborigines of the Namoi.

It has often been asserted that Australia abounds in anomalies, and in no instance is the truth of this proposition more fully exemplified than in the history of the very singular bird here represented, respecting the situation of which, in the natural system, much diversity of opinion has hitherto prevailed. It was consequently one of the birds which demanded my utmost attention during my late expedition, and I trust that the following details will assist in clearing up this long-disputed point.

The bird in question was originally described and figured by the late Dr. Latham in the first volume of his "General History of Birds," under the name of *New Holland Vulture*; but subsequently he conceived himself in error in classing it with the *Vulturidæ*, and at the end of the tenth volume of the same work placed it among the *Gallinaceæ*, with the generic appellation of *Alectura*: the species was afterwards dedicated to this venerable ornithologist by Mr. John Edward Gray, in his "Zoological Miscellany."

The generic and specific terms, *Catheturus Australis*, were subsequently applied to it by Mr. Swainson, who in both volumes of his "Classification of Birds" replaces it among the *Vulturidæ*, in order, apparently, to establish his own views respecting this family, of which he considers it the rasorial type, and details at some length why he entertains this opinion.

"The New Holland Vulture," says Mr. Swainson, "is so like a rasorial bird, that some authors have hesitated (not having seen a specimen) as to what order it really belonged. So completely, indeed, has nature disguised this rare and extraordinary vulture in the semblance of that type which it is to represent in its own family, that it has even been classed by one writer with the *Menura*; and it must be confessed, that if clear conceptions of the difference between analogy and affinity are not entertained, such a classification has some plausible reasons to recommend it. The feet, in fact, of the two birds are formed nearly on the same principle, but then so are those of *Orthonyx*, a little scansorial bird not much bigger than a Robin. All three genera, in short, are remarkable for their large disproportionate feet, long and slightly curved claws, and the equality of length, or nearly so, of the outer and the middle toe. Nor is this the only peculiarity of the New Holland Vulture; for, unlike all others of its family, it possesses eighteen feathers in its tail. An examination of the bill, which is decidedly raptorial, joined with many other considerations, shows that all these are but analogical relations to the *Rasores*, while the real affinities of the bird are in the circle of the *Vulturidæ*, of which it forms the rasorial type. A perfect specimen of this very rare vulture, now before us," continues this author, "enables us to speak of its structure from personal examination."

The term *Alectura* having been previously employed for a group of Flycatchers, and the present bird possessing all the characters of M. Lesson's genus *Talegalla*, which was published prior to Mr. Swainson's *Catheturus*, I feel that I ought to adopt that appellation.

How far its range may extend over Australia is not yet satisfactorily ascertained; it is known to inhabit various parts of New South Wales, from Cape Howe on the south to Moreton Bay on the north; but the assaults of the cedar-cutters and others who so frequently hunt through the brushes of Illawarra and Maitland, having nearly extirpated it from those localities, it is now most plentiful in the dense and little-trodden brushes of the Manning and Clarence. I was at first led to believe that the country between the mountain-ranges and the coast constituted its sole habitat; but I was agreeably surprised to find it also an inhabitant of the scrubby gullies and sides of the lower hills that branch off from the great range into the interior. I procured specimens on the Brezi range to the north of Liverpool Plains, and ascertained that it was abundant in all the hills on either side of the Namoi.

It is a gregarious bird, generally moving about in small companies, much after the manner of the *Gallinaceæ*, and, like some species of that tribe, is very shy and distrustful. When disturbed it readily eludes pursuit by the facility with which it runs through the tangled brush. If hard pressed, or when rushed upon by its great enemy the native dog, the whole company spring upon the lowermost bough of some neighbouring tree, and by a succession of leaps from branch to branch ascend to the top, and either perch there or fly off to another part of the brush. They are also in the habit of resorting to the branches of trees as a shelter from the mid-day sun, a peculiarity that greatly tends to their destruction, as the sportsman is not only enabled to take a certain aim, but, like the Ruffed Grouse of America, they will even allow a succession of shots to be fired until they are all brought down. Unless some measures be adopted for their preservation, this circumstance must lead to an early extinction of the race; an event much to be regretted, since, independently of its being an interesting bird for the aviary, its flesh is extremely delicate, tender, and juicy.

The most remarkable circumstances connected with the economy of this bird, are the facts of its not hatching its eggs by incubation: the means resorted to for effecting this object, although in some degree assimilating to the practice of the Ostrich, is yet upon a totally different principle. The Wattled Talegalla collects together an immense heap of decaying vegetable matter as a depositary for the eggs, and trusts to the heat engendered by the process of decomposition for the development of the young. The heap employed for this purpose is collected by the birds during several weeks previous to the period of laying;