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A new hypothesis on the identity of Gosse's Blue Partridge (*Zenaida? plumbea*) from Jamaica

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A new hypothesis on the identity of Gosse's Blue Partridge (*Zenaida? plumbea*) from Jamaica

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Cover Page: Anthony Robinson's "ground pigeon" (courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Jamaica), compared to, from top to bottom, Blue Ground Dove (*Claravis pretiosa*) from Ecuador, November 2022, by Paul Fenwick, Cornell Lab of Ornithology/Macaulay Library, accession ML506528321); Plumbeous Pigeon (*Patagioenas plumbea*) from Columbia, January 2020, by Emin Yogurtcuoglu, Cornell Lab of Ornithology/Macaulay Library, accession ML203223811); and Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) from the Dominican Republic, March 2022, by Marshall Iliff, Cornell Lab of Ornithology/Macaulay Library, accession ML430360101).

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Abstract

Historical natural history records can provide a valuable look into the past environment, but mistakes and misnomers are easily perpetuated. In these cases, it can be hard to distinguish genuine records of now-extinct birds from misnamed or misidentified extant species. The mystery of *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse, 1849 in Jamaica is one such example, where a species named and claimed from a nearly century-old illustration was assumed to be the Blue Partridge known by locals. Did this species truly exist? Was it a misattributed Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)? Or was it something else entirely? Here, we explore the mystery of *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse, comparing it to an illustration of a columbid found among the papers of Anthony Robinson (d. 1768), whose drawings and manuscripts were loaned by the Institute of Jamaica to the British Museum in 1928. These materials were returned to the Institute in 1992, where they are now located in the Natural History Museum of Jamaica. Robinson's papers are a gold mine of interest for animal and plant information from the 18th century and they led us to new speculations about *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse, 1849.

Keywords

Anthony Robinson, introduced birds, Jamaica, Philip Henry Gosse, *Zenaida macroura*, *Zenaida? plumbea*

Resumen

Una nueva hipótesis sobre la identidad de la Perdiz Azul de Gosse (*Zenaida? plumbea*) de Jamaica • Los registros históricos de historia natural pueden proporcionar una valiosa visión del entorno del pasado, pero es fácil que se perpetúen errores y denominaciones incorrectas. En estos casos, puede ser difícil distinguir entre los registros auténticos de aves hoy extintas y los de especies existentes mal identificadas o mal nombradas. El misterio de *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse, 1849 en Jamaica es un uno de esos ejemplos, donde una especie fue nombrada y reivindicada a partir de una ilustración de casi un siglo de antigüedad, asumiéndose que se trataba de la Perdiz Azul, conocida por los locales. ¿Realmente existió esta especie? ¿Fue una equivocación y en realidad era *Zenaida macroura*? ¿O era algo completamente diferente? Aquí, exploramos el misterio de *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse, comparándola con una ilustración de un colúmbido hallada entre los documentos de Anthony Robinson (fallecido en 1768), cuyos dibujos y manuscritos fueron prestados por el Instituto de Jamaica al Museo Británico en 1928. Estos materiales fueron devueltos al Instituto en 1992, y actualmente se encuentran en el Museo de Historia Natural de Jamaica. Los documentos de Robinson constituyen una valiosa fuente de información sobre animales y plantas del siglo XVIII y nos han llevado a nuevas especulaciones sobre *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse, 1849.

Palabras clave

Anthony Robinson, aves introducidas, Jamaica, Philip Henry Gosse, *Zenaida macroura*, *Zenaida? plumbea*

Résumé

Une nouvelle hypothèse sur l'identité de la Tourterelle plombée (*Zenaida ? plumbea*) de Gosse, en Jamaïque • Les données naturalistes anciennes peuvent fournir un aperçu précieux de l'environnement passé, mais les erreurs et les appellations erronées y perdurent facilement. Il peut alors être difficile de distinguer

les véritables mentions d'oiseaux aujourd'hui disparus de celles d'espèces encore présentes mais mal nommées ou mal identifiées. Le mystère de *Zenaida? plumbea*, Gosse, 1849, en Jamaïque, en est un exemple, dans lequel une espèce nommée et revendiquée d'après une illustration datant de près d'un siècle était supposée être la Tourterelle plombée connue par les habitants de la région. Cette espèce a-t-elle vraiment existé? S'agit-il d'une Tourterelle triste (*Zenaida macroura*) mal déterminée? Ou s'agit-il d'une espèce tout à fait différente? Nous explorons ici le mystère de *Zenaida? plumbea*, Gosse, en la comparant à une illustration d'un columbidé trouvée dans les documents d'Anthony Robinson (décédé en 1768) dont les dessins et manuscrits ont été prêtés par l'Institute of Jamaica au British Museum en 1928. Ces documents ont été restitués à l'Institut en 1992 et se trouvent aujourd'hui au Musée d'histoire naturelle de la Jamaïque. Les documents de Robinson représentent une mine d'informations sur les animaux et les plantes du XVIII^e siècle et ils nous ont permis de formuler de nouvelles hypothèses sur *Zenaida? plumbea*, Gosse, 1849.

Mots clés

Anthony Robinson, Jamaïque, oiseaux introduits, Philip Henry Gosse, *Zenaida macroura*, *Zenaida? plumbea*

The naturalist Philip Henry Gosse set sail for Jamaica in October 1844 and stayed 18 months on the island; he subsequently published *The Birds of Jamaica* in 1847—the most comprehensive volume on Jamaican birds at the time. This was followed in 1849 by Illustrations of *The Birds of Jamaica* and in 1851 by *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica*. Following his prolonged stay in the countryside, he stopped in Spanish Town and visited with Richard Hill who introduced him to the work of Dr. Anthony Robinson. Thus, Gosse was able to study a collection from the 1700s of notes and illustrations of birds, other animals, and plants.

One of the birds Gosse included in *The Birds of Jamaica* is still a puzzle for ornithologists as he mentions the species only briefly: "The woodsmen speak of a Blue Partridge, ... [it] is figured by Robinson, and is no doubt a ground pigeon" (Gosse and Hill 1847:324). He made his own interpretation of the original drawing after seeing the one in Robinson's papers and included this in the Illustrations of the Birds of Jamaica, labelled '*Zenaida? plumbea*, Gosse'. In so doing, he determined its systematic relationship with columbids and claimed its discovery for himself, but never stated that he had observed it in the wild. Ever since, this bird has remained a mystery.

History of *Zenaida? plumbea*, Gosse

Dr. Anthony Robinson was a medical doctor who came to Jamaica in the mid-18th century. He collected vast information on the island's plants and animals, along with creating and compiling many illustrations. He died in Jamaica in 1768 before he could put his notes in order, but left them to Edward Long, who is best known for his three-volume treatise on the geography, natural history, commerce, and laws of 18th century Jamaica (Long 1774). Long's brother, Robert, had the notes copied from the bits and pieces of Robinson's jottings and put them together with the illustrations (Cockerell 1894). One portfolio of drawings and four large quarto volumes of fragile manuscripts were loaned to the British Museum, U.K. in 1928. These volumes were returned to the Institute of Jamaica in 1992, where they are now located in the Natural History Museum of Jamaica. Robinson's papers are a gold mine of interest for animal and plant information from the 18th century.

Among the papers, there are 176 illustrations of birds, approximately 125 executed by Robinson himself and some by Edward Long (acknowledged with Robinson's assistance). Eleven illustrations were created by Andrew Peter Dupont (d. 1770), a draughtsman who drew for both Robert Long and Samuel Felton

Esq. FRS. Finally, 40 illustrations were created by A. Mackey, described by Robinson as "Reverend" and "Doctor" (probably "25 July 1766 Alexander MacKay originally of New Machar, Aberdeenshire, Minister of the gospel in the Parish of St. David, Jamaica, died"; Jamaican Family Search Genealogy Research Library n.d.). All attempts to track further details of "Mackey" for this current article yielded no further details. These men drew or painted birds in Jamaica: native, resident species (e.g., "Columba cauda torquate seu, fascia. The Ring-tail'd Pigeon"); migrants (a blue and white Moticilla); and introduced ("e.g. other species of this genus (Psittacai) brought from divers parts of the world") (Robinson d. 1768).

The Mysterious "Ground Pigeon"

While researching Anthony Robinson's volumes (Robinson d. 1768) at the Institute of Jamaica, Natural History Division, the lead author discovered an original painting of a "ground pigeon" in Manuscript 178 Vol. 2 (Folio 18 No. 17) (Fig. 1). She then found a section entitled "Observations on Dr. Mackey's Drawings of Birds in Water Colours", also under Number 17, which included the comment "The figure of A Small Ash-color'd Dove or Pigeon, the ground Pigeon. A Non-Descript." The painting is attributed to "Rev. A. MacKey" (sometimes referred to as "Dr. Mackay"). Robinson does not claim to be the illustrator and, indeed, the quality of the painting is below the standard of Robinson, whom today would be ranked as a scientific illustrator.

Distinguishing features in MacKey's illustration are the pronounced beak, the black flight feathers edged with white, the white bar in the coverts, black in the tertials, and the long ash-grey tail with white tips on the outer feathers. The slate-grey underparts contrast to the overall ash-grey of the rest of the body and the auricular region appears slightly lighter, almost whitish. The iris is dark brown and the feet are red with the toes three in front and one back.

The near-identical characterization in Gosse's more refined illustration of the bird that he named *Zenaida? plumbea* and the knowledge that he had seen Robinson's materials when they were in the care of Richard Hill lead to only one conclusion, namely that Gosse based his illustration on Mackey's. In Gosse's illustration, the bird has a blue-gray color: the upper part of the wing is blue-gray ending in black, the latter part of the primary and secondary feathers of the wings black edged with white, and a short tail with the outer feathers tipped with white. Gosse also included black on the tertials. (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Painting of a “ground pigeon” included in Dr. Anthony Robinson’s 18th century natural history collection. The painting is attributed by Robinson to a “Rev. A. MacKey / Dr. Mackey.” Presented courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Jamaica.



Fig. 2. *Zenaida? plumbea* as presented by Gosse in *Illustrations of the Birds of Jamaica* (1849).

Zenaida plumbea has sometimes been included on lists of Jamaican birds. Some lists, such as Avibase (2023), include reference to Gosse (e.g., *Zenaida plumbea* Gosse, 1849) and describe it as “Species status: species without a specimen and now extinct”. Others, such as Clarivate Analytics (2023) simply note “No Recent Publications”. In the United States National Museum Bulletin 50, Ridgway (1916) classified it as “Extinct” and noted: “This bird, which is known only from an unpublished colored drawing by a Mr. Robinson, seems to be one of the many West Indian species which have become extinct. It was apparently still extant in Gosse’s time and was known to the woodsmen of Jamaica as the ‘Blue Partridge.’” BirdLife International (2023) takes a skeptical approach including it in the section on Hypothetical Taxa based on Greenway (1967).

There is no evidence that Gosse saw the bird he illustrated and named *Zenaida? plumbea*. Indeed, he explicitly wrote that “The woodsmen speak of a Blue Partridge, ... [it] is figured by Robinson, and is no doubt a ground pigeon” (Gosse and Hill 1847). Gosse then made assumptions, notably that: (a) Robinson had painted the illustration, and (b) as a highly skilled illustrator in all of his (Robinson’s) other works, the painting which Gosse viewed must have been judged to be a reliable representation of the bird (i.e., worthy of Gosse creating a more stylish version of the 18th century painting). Gosse then also assumed that the bird illustrated by Mackey in the 18th century was the same bird woodsmen called “Blue Pigeon” in the mid-19th century. So, did this columbid exist in the wild in the 1700s or was Mackey’s illustration that of a caged bird carried into Jamaica, as occurred not infrequently during this colonial period? If it was a wild bird, did it still exist when Gosse visited Jamaica in the 1840s but then disappeared after 1872 when the small Indian mongoose (*Urva avropunctata*) was introduced? Or does it still exist today because Gosse confused the name Blue Partridge for a native species which had been missed by earlier naturalists and Gosse himself?

The Case for an Introduced Species

Jamaica has a long history of introduction of birds by early settlers, some illustrated by Robinson: pheasants and peacocks, and

the Orange-chinned Parakeet (*Brotogeris jugularis*) and Venezuelan Troupial (*Icterus icterus*) from Central or South America. Other examples of introduced species include the Cuban Bullfinch (*Melopyrrha nigra*) and the Blue-headed Quail-Dove (*Starnoenas cyanocephala*) (Bangs and Kennard 1920).

One possibility based on terrestrial characteristics of a “ground dove” for the MacKey/Gosse bird is the Blue Ground Dove (*Claravis pretiosa*), a small ground dove which occurs from Mexico to Peru and Argentina, whose male is blue and female is brown (Kala 2020). The Blue Ground Dove tolerates a wide variety of habitats from semi-humid forest edges to scrub habitats and feeds on the ground, so if a caged specimen had escaped into the wild there is a good chance it would have survived in Jamaica; however, the Blue Ground Dove’s yellow bill and heavy speckling on the wings rule out this species for the MacKey/Gosse illustration. Another contender for an introduced species, based on plumage patterns, is the Plumbeous Pigeon (*Patagioenas plumbea*), which is widespread in northern South America (Baptista *et al.* 2020). This species, however, is a canopy-dwelling species, not a ground dove/pigeon or “partridge” in Jamaican parlance.

The Case for an Extant, Native Species: Pigeons and Doves of Jamaica

On examination of Gosse’s *Birds of Jamaica*, we compared his columbids with those of Jamaica (Table 1).

One Jamaican species is missing in Gosse’s list, namely the Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*). Before coming to Jamaica, Gosse spent eight months in the US state of Alabama in 1838 (Gosse 1859, Encyclopedia of Alabama 2023); there he wrote about the local flora and fauna and illustrated “Turtle-doves (*Columba carolinensis*)” now known as the Mourning Dove. He described their habits, and their song as “soft and mournful notes— [it] consists of five syllables.” If he knew the species so well, why did Gosse omit mention of the “Turtle dove” (Mourning Dove) among the birds of Jamaica?

Could the MacKey/Robinson “Ground Pigeon” be the Mourning Dove and the source of Gosse’s *Zenaida plumbea*? To the

Table 1. Comparison of Gosse's Birds of Jamaica with those of Jamaica.

Gosse's List			Jamaica List	
1	Ring-tail Pigeon	<i>Columba caribbaea</i>	Ring-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas caribbaea</i>
2	Blue Pigeon	<i>Columba rufina</i>	Plain Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas inornata</i>
3	Bald-pate	<i>Columba leucocephala</i>	White-crowned Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas leucocephala</i>
4	White-wing Dove	<i>Turtur leucopterus</i>	White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
5	Peadove	<i>Zenaida amabilis</i>	Zenaida Dove	<i>Zenaida aurita</i>
6	Ground Dove	<i>Chamoepelia passerina</i>	Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
7	Whitebelly	<i>Peristera Jamaicensis</i>	Caribbean Dove	<i>Leptotila jamaicensis</i>
8	Mountain Witch	<i>Geotrygon sylvatica</i>	Crested Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon versicolor</i>
9	Partridge Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>	Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>
10	[Gosse. Plate 85: <i>Zenaida? plumbea</i> .]	324 "Blue Partridge... no doubt a ground pigeon"	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>

best of our knowledge, this possibility has not been considered before in the literature.

The Case for the Mourning Dove

Similar to the slightly larger Zenaida Dove (*Zenaida aurita*), which Gosse recognized as the "Peadove", the Mourning Dove is terrestrial in its feeding habitats—a first important correspondence to the label of "ground pigeon" on the MacKey illustration. Although the MacKey bird is not positioned in a particular setting in order to indicate a habitat association and, in comparison to Gosse's refined illustration, it is rather crudely depicted, given that we now appreciate that Gosse appears to have copied from MacKey, this 18th century original stands as the more valid source from which to attempt an identification.

First, some basic notes about plumage point us to the Mourning Dove (Fig. 3). Goodwin (1967) described the color as "Upperparts a light greyish drab with a slight buffy tinge, shading to bluish grey on centre of crown and nape and outer part of wing. Black markings on wing coverts and scapulars. Tail long. The legs are short and reddish colored...wing coverts have pale buffy or whitish terminal margins".

MacKey's illustration corresponds in a number of ways: a thin area of bluish bare skin surrounding the eyes; bluish-grey cap; a small light-colored patch on the side of the head; the primaries are black with white edges; sections of the scapulars are black, giving an appearance of spots; the outer tail feathers with their white edges, and the legs and toes are red. However, there are also discrepancies in his illustration. For example, the Mourning Dove does not have a white bar on the wing, but it does have a black subauricular arc which is not shown in MacKey's illustration. It also tends to display more pronounced rounded dorsal black spots, a pink-tinged breast and a light belly, but these color nuances are variable according to sex and molt cycle, with adult females or specimens in winter plumage appearing much more uniform (Sullivan and Mirarchi 1999). In this case, the Mourning Dove is quite a close match to MacKey's illustration and, indeed, justifies consideration of the hypothesis that MacKey's 18th century illustration is the Mourning Dove. This would then call into

question Gosse's (1847) assertion that the "Blue Partridge" of which "woodsmen speak" and "is figured by Robinson and is no doubt a ground pigeon" is a unique species warranting the name *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse.

The Mourning Dove in Jamaica

In Jamaica, the resident subspecies of Mourning Dove is *Z. m. macroura*. The main recorded habitat of this species in Jamaica is dry coastal forests and agricultural lands, often near fresh water, as in the south centre of the island, in the Hellshire Hills of St. Catherine and Portland Ridge in Clarendon along the south coast, and also in the northwest in St. James (NEPA 2013). Since this is the most suitable habitat in which to find this species, it is unlikely that Gosse would have come across it as he spent much of his time in the interior of Westmoreland, in the west of Jamaica, which boasts 12 rivers in 312 square miles. But the Mourning Dove "generally shuns deep woods or extensive forests and selects more open woodlands and edges ... for nesting" (Otis *et al.* 2020).

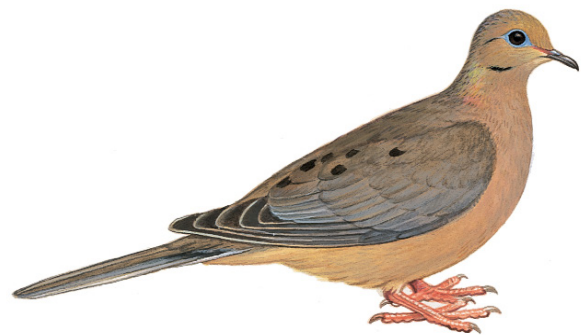


Fig. 3. Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), as illustrated in Raffaele *et al.* 2020. Color image from 'A guide to the Birds of the West Indies.' With permission from Princeton University Press and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wildlife Without Borders Program.

Final Remarks

Like Gosse, James Bond did not discover the Mourning Dove in Jamaica—in his 1940 Checklist he records “Jamaica (one record)”. In fact, it was not until the late 1940s that he found it, apparently from talking to bird hunters: “The greatest surprise of my trip was to learn the Mourning Dove was well established in Jamaica, and an important game bird in the southern part of the island...This was well known to pigeon hunters.” (Bond 1950).

Other Jamaican birds are given the local name “Blue”; e.g., the Plain Pigeon *Patagioenas inornata* is referred to by Gosse and is still locally known as “Blue Pigeon”. However, the Mourning Dove’s local names in Jamaica are “Long-tail pea dove” and “Paloma”. Even nowadays the Mourning Dove is little recognized in Jamaica (except by bird hunters) as evidenced by the number of photographs on Macaulay Library’s website for Jamaica which amounts to 41, in contrast to the Zenaida Dove which displays over 405 photographs (as of September 8th 2024).

We find only two specimens of Mourning Dove from Jamaica in well-known museum collections—the type USNM 2367375 an adult male, dated February 1866, and a mounted specimen in the Natural History Museum of Jamaica (no date).

Could *Zenaida? plumbea* in fact be the native Mourning Dove? Or was it a migrant or introduced species? Based on these discoveries within the pages of Robinson’s manuscript, we urge caution and skepticism to claims that *Zenaida? plumbea* Gosse ever existed and was extirpated.

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Author Contributions

CL found the illustration in the papers of Anthony Robinson, initiated the idea of the article and prepared the first draft. SK was consulted and several paragraphs were added. The changes were agreed on and the paper amended.

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