

Count Raggi's Bird

*The Italian explorer Luigi D'Albertis obtained the first trade skin of the species and wrote in 1880 'If this be a new species, as I really believe it is, I purpose [sic] calling it Paradisea Raggiana, after an old and true friend of mine, the Marquis Raggi, of Genoa, a most ardent sportsman and zoologist.'*¹

I recently acquired a box marked "FEATHERS" at the Great Western Auctions, a box which looked as though it had once belonged to a fashionable and wealthy woman. The feathers were wrapped within lace and the box was emblazoned with the logo of Forsyth's, an exclusive Scottish department store that closed some decades ago. There was a bird's head in the box, coloured a glossy, inky, black. I took this to the Zoology Museum in Glasgow University where staff identified it as *Paradisea raggiana*. The bird's head had been dyed but the clue for its classification came from slight amber and green flecks suggesting the original colour. The body and exuberant wing plumes of the bird would have been a combination of reds and browns, such as Warm Sepia, Amber, Maroon, Walnut Brown, Crimson, Ferruginous, Vinaceous Pink and Hazel.

Count Raggi's Bird of Paradise is only found in New Guinea. Male Birds of Paradise have evolved varied and spectacular arrays of plumage with which to court females; Count Raggi's Birds of Paradise collect in trees in groups of up to ten, known as 'leks'. They display their arching feathers simultaneously but the hens always choose the same male, the one in top condition.

Birds of Paradise have long been favoured by the ruling classes. People in New Guinea traded their skins for millennia and offered them to Europeans when they first arrived in the Antipodes. Linnaeus, the great taxonomist, gave them the scientific name '*apoda*' because the early trade skins had their feet removed, inducing a European belief that they were really footless and that they perpetually floated, feeding on dew and fresh air.

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Raggiana Bird of Paradise

Paradisaea raggiana Sclater, 1873

Other names: Count Raggi's Bird of Paradise, Raggi's Bird of Paradise, Empress of Germany's Bird of *Paradise* (*P. r. augustavictoriae*), Marquis Raggi's Bird of Paradise, Grant's Bird of Paradise (*P. r. granti*). *Bounde* of the Kup region, Wahgi Valley, Papua New Guinea, (Mayr and Gilliard 1954), *Kwa'hua* and *la'kwa* at Lake Kutubu (Schodde and Hitchcock 1968). *Tay* of the Kalam People (Majnep and Bulmer 1977), *Ubiya* of the Huli People (Goldman 1981). *To* of the Fore, *oromo* of the Gimi and *puri* of the Daribi People of the Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea (Diamond 1972). Also *Oromo*, *Pameri* or *Tovoi* of the Gimi people of Crater Mt, (D. Gillison *in litt.*). *Gabi* in the Waria Valley, Papua New Guinea (W. Cooper *in litt.*).²

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*Many birds of paradise have been named after royalty. One of the earliest was Queen Victoria's Riflebird (*Ptiloris victoriae*) of Australia, named after his monarch by John Gould, the English artist-naturalist in 1850. The Germans, who were active in New Guinea in the 1880's, named two outstanding species after their then emperor and empress (*P. guilelmi* and *P. augustaevictoria*). The Austrian Otto Finsch named the Blue Bird of Paradise *P. rudolphi*, in honour of Archduke Rudolph of Habsburg, who died so tragically a short while later at Mayerling, and Princess Stephanie's Bird of Paradise (*Astrapia stephaniae*), one of the ribbon-tailed group, after Rudolph's Belgian consort.³*

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Early European bird collectors who spent long periods in the field write of men waiting patiently and silently for up to two days to shoot or capture a bird of paradise from a blind ... The small material rewards offered by traders to native plume hunters were, to them, equivalent to a 'king's ransom'...

The Biagge people of the Upper Mambare Valley, Papua New Guinea, deploy a hand-woven net (much like a locally manufactured version of a Japanese mist net) across the traditional escape route of male Raggiana birds in their lek tree. They then pull on a rope attached to branches atop the tree (simulating predator attack) which frightens the males into evacuating the lek. At the same time another person deploys the net, and the birds, following their escape route, fly right into it.⁴

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The month of May, 1895, was the culminating point of a deplorable fashion in London. Few bonnets and hats were to be seen without the adornment of a graceful spray of soft, fine, plumes, with drooping or curly tips. These beautiful "Bird of Paradise" feathers could be purchased in quantities in every milliner's shop, and the assurance that they were real, which there is little reason to doubt, could usually be elicited.⁵

Dress Worn at His Majesty's Court

Ladies attending Their Majesties' Courts will appear in Full Dress, with trains and plumes. For Half Mourning black and white, white, mauve or grey should be worn. Feathers should be worn so that they can be clearly seen on approaching the Presence, with white veils or lappets. Coloured feathers are inadmissible, but in deep mourning black feathers may be worn. White gloves only are to be worn except in case of mourning when black or grey gloves are admissible.⁶

References and acknowledgements

¹ Clifford B Frith and Bruce M Beehler (1998:458), *The Birds of Paradise*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

² Clifford B Frith and Bruce M Beehler (1998:456, *op cit.*

³ Austin OL and Singer A (1962:234) *Birds of the World*. Hamlyn

⁴ Clifford B Frith and Bruce M Beehler (1998:148-149), *op cit.*

⁵ Margaretta L Lemon. *Birds of Paradise* (1895), Leaflet No. 20 of the Society for the Protection of Birds (now the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds).

⁶ "Dress Worn at his Majesty's Court" was issued with the authority of the Lord Chamberlain in 1898 and edited by Herbert Trendell, M.V.O., Chief Clerk. Cited in *Ceremonial Costume*, Alan Mansfield, Alan & Charles Black: London (1980:127).

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