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Lyll's wren: pp 186-188.

Lyll's Wren *Traversia lyalli* Rothschild 1894, Endemic
July 1894 Stephens Island, Cook Strait, Wellington

The only known flightless passerine, about 15 specimens were collected between 1894 and 1899. Not all may have been collected by the lighthouse keeper's cat, as frequently alleged. Only 12 specimens can now be located. Galbreath & Brown (2004) give a detailed and interesting account of the wren's discovery and demise, from which the following is taken.

F.W. Ingram, a worker engaged in constructing the light-house in 1892, recorded seeing "birds there in plenty", including "two kinds of wrens (very small birds)". A cat began bringing in small birds sometime after January 1894. David Lyall, an assistant keeper, was possibly the only person to have seen the bird alive, and then only twice. He noted that the wren "ran like a mouse", and "did not fly at all".

Lyll gave A.W. Bethune, an engineer on the supply steamer *Hinemoa*, a specimen to take to Buller in July 1894. Buller did not show the new species to others, as he wished to publish a description in *Ibis*. Then Henry Travers stepped into the picture, obtaining specimens from Lyll, and sending them on to Walter Rothschild, who could pay more than Buller.

Buller described *Xenicus insularis* the "Island Wren", but Rothschild had obtained nine specimens from Henry Travers, and made sure he published first. This led to bitter recriminations for many years.

"I have described and named this new bird, which may fittingly be called the Island-wren, as distinguished from our Bush-wren and Rock-wren; and as these island-forms present features of special interest to the student of geographic zoology, I am forwarding the specimen in the hope that it may be figured. My correspondent on the island informs me that the bird is semi-nocturnal in its habits, and that he has seen three examples, all of which were brought in at different times by the cat. I hope shortly to receive further specimens of this interesting form. In the meantime I regret that I am unable to give the sex of the bird here described. In plumage it differs conspicuously from the other two species, and it has a decidedly more robust bill, whilst the claw on the hind-toe is not larger than in *Xenicus longipes*."

At a recent meeting of the Ornithologists' Club in London, the Hon. W. Rothschild, the well-known collector, described this veritable rara avis, specimens of which he had obtained from Mr. Henry Travers, of Wellington, who, we understand, got them from the lighthouse-keeper at Stephen Island, who in his turn is reported to have been indebted to his cat for this remarkable ornithological 'find'. As to how many specimens Mr. Travers, the lighthouse-keeper, and the cat, managed to secure between them, we have no information, but there is very good reason to believe that the bird is no longer to be found on the island, and, as it is not known to exist anywhere else, it has apparently become quite extinct. This is probably a record performance in the way of extermination.

The English scientific world will hear almost simultaneously of the bird's discovery and of its disappearance before anything is known of its life-history or its habits. It was only a little creature, about four inches in length, allied to the little Rock-wren, which lives in the mountains, and is occasionally found dead on our glaciers. It was not a flightless bird, but from its structure was evidently very weak-winged, and thus fell an easy prey to the lighthouse-keeper's cat... Not only scientists, but all New-Zealanders who take an interest in the preservation of whatever is specially characteristic of the colony, will deplore the extermination of

such an interesting creature. It is, indeed, saddening to reflect how, one by one, the rare and wonderful birds which have made New Zealand an object of supreme interest among scientists all over the world are gradually becoming extinct... And we certainly think it would be as well if the Marine Department, in sending lighthouse-keepers to isolated islands where interesting specimens of native fauna are known or believed to exist, were to see that they are not allowed to take any cats with them, even if mouse-traps have to be furnished at the cost of the State” (Buller 1895).