



David Douglas and the Original Description of the Hawaiian Goose

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All modern references to the supposed original description of the Nene or Hawaiian Goose (*Branta sandvicensis*) are doubly erroneous. Furthermore, it is a little appreciated fact that the specimens upon which the scientific name was based were sent to England by none other than David Douglas (he of the Douglas Fir), one of the more illustrious early naturalists to visit the Hawaiian Islands, and who met a grisly and enigmatic death on the island of Hawaii in 1834 (Harvey 1947, McKelvey 1955, Morwood 1973, Davies 1980). Although Douglas is renowned for his botanical explorations of the American West, where he also collected and described birds, there appears to be no other connection between Douglas and the ornithological history of Hawaii. I therefore review here the literature concerning the proper original citation for the Nene and Douglas' association with it.

Although "geese... not unlike the Chinese geese... called Nana" were recorded on the island of Hawaii at the time of Captain Cook's discovery of the archipelago in 1778 (Ellis 1782, quoted in Medway 1981), it was not until much later that the Hawaiian Goose was provided with a scientific name. Rothschild (1900) appears to be the only author, however, who gives the correct citation for the species. Most others, beginning at least with Wilson and Evans (1893:187), have cited the name *Anser sandvicensis* Vigors as dating from a list of animals in the gardens of the Zoological Society of London published in June 1833. Although this was the 11th edition of this list, Peters (1931) mistakenly cites it as the 3rd edition, in which error he has been followed by all modern authorities (e.g., Delacour 1954, Wagstaffe 1978, Johnsgard 1979, American Ornithologists' Union 1983), so that we may doubt that any compiler in this century has taken the trouble to consult the actual reference, which reads as follows:

SANDWICH ISLAND GOOSE

Anser Sandvicensis, Vigors.

A pair of these birds, which appear to be hitherto undescribed, was presented to the Society by Lady Glengall. (Vigors 1833a:4)

At this point, the name is an absolute *nomen nudum*, with no nomenclatural standing whatever. The next appearance of the name is likewise an absolute *nomen nudum*:

A specimen was exhibited of a *Goose* from the Sandwich Islands, being one of a pair recently living at the

Society's Gardens, to which they were presented by Lady Glengall. Mr. Vigors characterized it as a species of *Barnacle Goose*, by the name of *Bernicla Sandvicensis*, and pointed out its distinguishing marks. He also observed on the general resemblance in the distribution of colouring which occurs in the species of *Bernicla* and in those of many other groups of *Birds*. (Vigors 1833b:65)

Although the specimen could well have been exhibited alive, the wording "recently living" implicitly suggests that it was already dead by 11 June 1833, when the notice was read. Not until 1834 did there appear an actual description to accompany Vigors' name. This was part of a rather long communication that began:

A specimen was exhibited of the young of the *Sandwich Island Goose*, *Bernicla Sandvicensis*, Vig., which was hatched at Knowsley. It was accompanied by the following note from the President, Lord Stanley.

"Through the kindness of John Reeves, Esq., I received at Knowsley a pair of these birds on the 15th of February, 1834." (Stanley 1834:43)

This preceded five paragraphs, all in quotes, from Lord Stanley regarding the breeding of the species in captivity, no portion of which can be said to constitute a description of any sort, apart from a reference to "its Quaker-like simplicity of plumage" (Stanley 1834:43). To Stanley's account is then added a *bona fide* description:

The bird in question was named by Mr. Vigors at the Meeting of the Society on June 11, 1833. It may be characterized as follows:

Bernicla Sandvicensis. *Bern. brunneo-nigrescens, subtus marginibusque plumarum pallidioribus; collo albescenti; gula, facie, capite supernè, lineâque longitudinali nuchali nigris; crisso albo.*

Long. tot. 24 unc., *rostri*, rictus 1½; *alae*, 13¾; *caudae*, 5; *tarsi*, 2⅞.

Hab. in insulis Sandvicensibus et in Owyhee. (Vigors 1834:43)

Unlike Stanley's communication, this entry is not in quotes. By all authors who have cited it, it has been attributed to Vigors, who was then secretary to the Zoological Society of London. This must be considered the original citation for the specific name of the Nene, which fortunately, does not change in spelling or in authorship. In the format of Peters' Check-list (Johnsgard 1979) the citation should appear thus:

BRANTA SANDVICENSIS

Branta sandvicensis (Vigors)

Bernicla sandvicensis Vigors, 1834, Proc. Zool. Soc. London, 1834, p. 43—Sandwich Islands and Owyhee [= island of Hawaii].

With regard to the type material, Vigors' (1834) description had to be based on the specimen exhibited at the Society's meeting of 11 June (Vigors 1833b), as the only other Hawaiian Geese then in England were presumably Lord Stanley's, which were still alive at Knowsley and would probably not have been seen by Vigors. The holotype has been assumed to be the specimen now in the Liverpool Museum (T12706), where it was received in the first collection of H.B. Tristram, having formerly been in the collection of T.C. Eyton (no. 4270), who in turn had received it from the museum of the Zoological Society (Wagstaffe 1978:5). The fate of the second member of the original pair at the Zoological Society is unknown. Another old specimen at Liverpool (D890) may have been "one of the birds received by Lord Stanley in February 1834 or its descendant" but there is no helpful documentation on this point (M. Lagen, *in litt.* 1 February 1988). It would have no status as a type in any case.

That David Douglas supplied the original pair of *Branta sandvicensis* we know only from the narrative of a whaling voyage around the world by F.D. Bennett (1840), himself an accomplished naturalist, in which he mentions that:

The Sandwich Island goose (*Bernicla Sandvicensis*, Vigors.) . . . has been recently described from a living pair of these birds sent to England by the late enterprising traveller, Mr. D. Douglas, and presented, by Lady Glengall, to the London Zoological Society. (Bennett 1840:251)

David Douglas is known to have visited the Hawaiian Islands on at least three occasions, the first, which is often overlooked, was a stopover in Honolulu in the ship *Eagle* after departing England 31 October 1829 on his return to the Columbia River, where he arrived on 3 June 1830 (Davies 1980:154). His second visit was in 1832, and his third and final sojourn in the archipelago began 23 December 1833 and ended with his death on the island of Hawaii on 12 July 1834. The last visit began long after the geese he sent had arrived in England, so it is the second visit that concerns us. For this, Harvey (1947) has Douglas arriving on 7 September and departing on 12 September 1832, and McKelvey (1955) also inferred his arrival as 7 September. Judd and Lind (1974) put Douglas' arrival in Honolulu in August, and Davies (1980:154) has him staying for three weeks. His stay in Honolulu must have been quite short in any case, for he arrived at Fort Vancouver by mid-October 1832 (Morwood 1973:192).

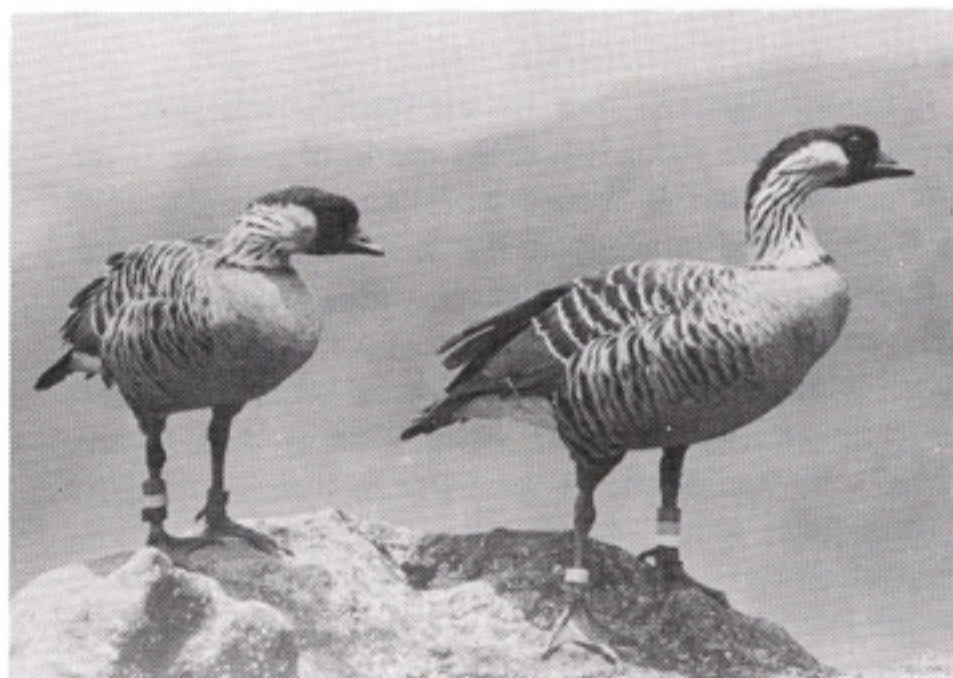
During this brief time he was preoccupied with packing and shipping his California collections.

From the Sandwich Islands, I shipped on board the *Sarah and Elizabeth*, a South-Seaman of London, and bound for that port, nineteen large bundles of dried plants, in two chests, together with seeds, specimens of timber, &c. (Douglas, in McKelvey 1955:408)

Although no geese are mentioned, they must have been included in the "&c" because the *Sarah and Elizabeth* departed on 11 September 1832 (Judd and Lind 1974:24) and the geese arrived in London in or before June 1833, when they were exhibited at the Zoological Society's gardens (Vigors 1833a). To dispatch them so shortly after his arrival, Douglas would have had to obtain the geese from some other party who already had them in captivity in Honolulu. This obscure and incidental gesture remains the only link between Hawaiian ornithology and one of the truly great and tragic figures in the annals of natural history.

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Nene - *Branta Sandvicensis* (Vigors)

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