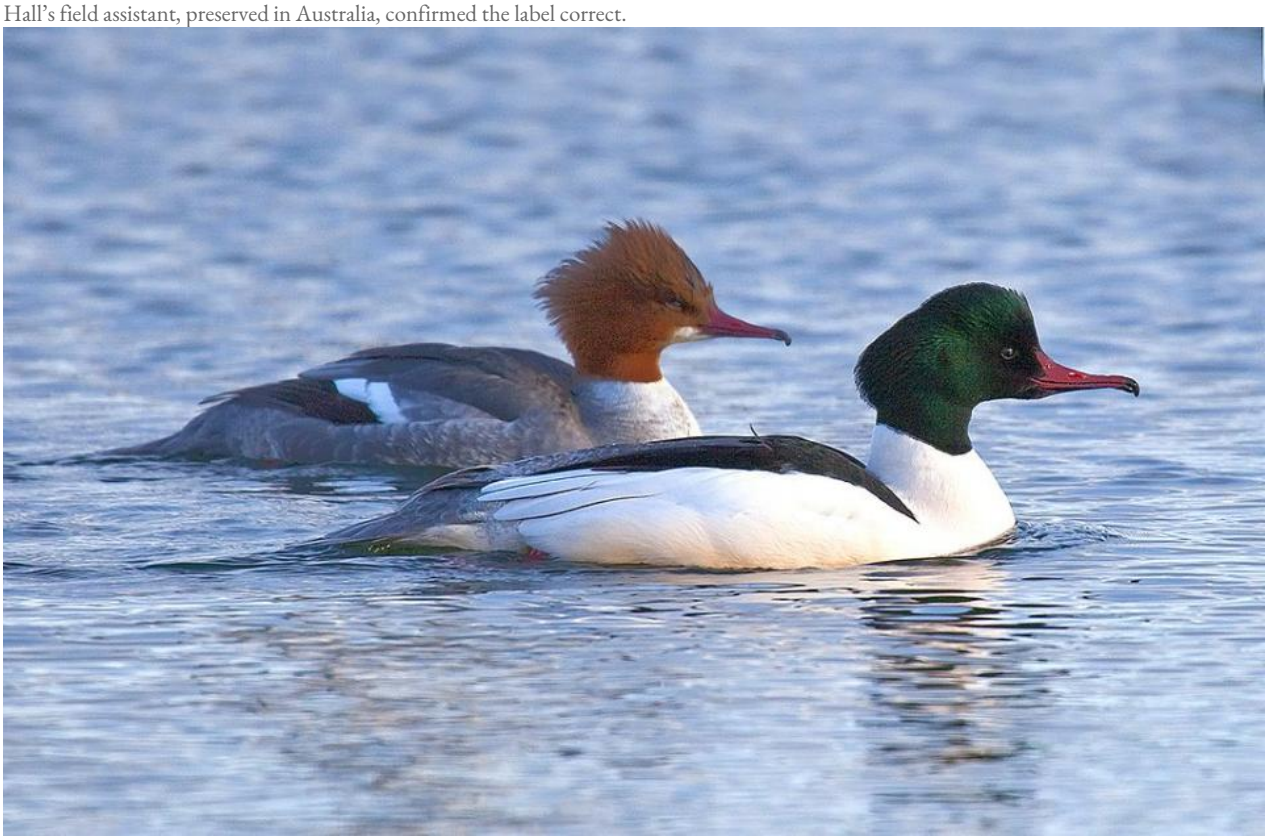
The Mystery of the Merganser

Libby Robin

Summary

This international mystery tells of a scientific puzzle in America solved by a historical find in Australia. The bird at the center of the mystery, the merganser (goosander), was labelled in unknown handwriting *Gensan Korea*, May 1903. The bird skin (AMNH 734284) is part of the Robert Hall Collection, which came via London to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Could a merganser could be native to (i.e. breed in) Korea? There are no other records of mergansers outside winter, and few specimens from North Korea. Letters by R. E. Trebilcock, Hall's field assistant, preserved in Australia, confirmed the label correct.

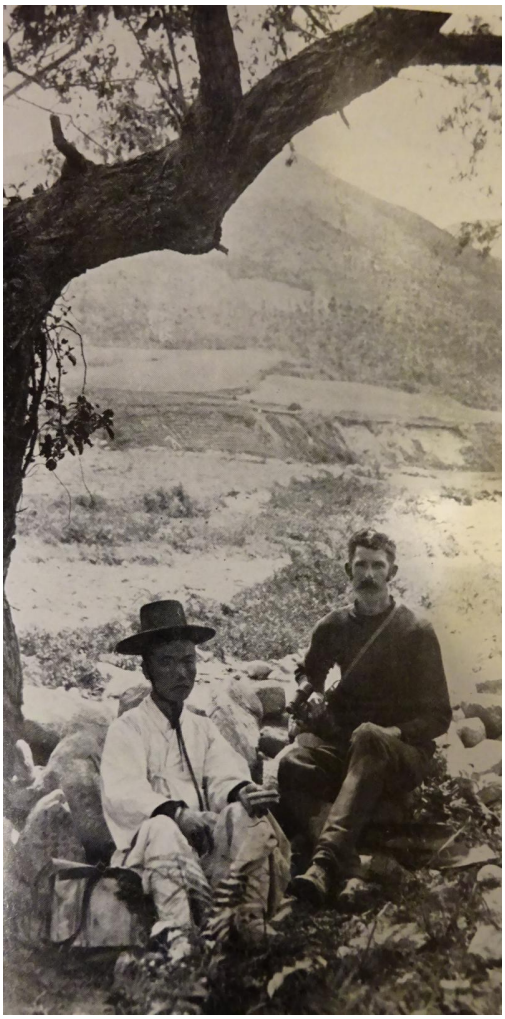


A male and a female common merganser (North American) or goosander (Eurasian) (*Mergus merganser*).

This image was taken by Bengt Nyman. Click here to view Wikimedia source.

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Robert Hall, collector of East Asian birds, in Korea in 1903 with a guide.

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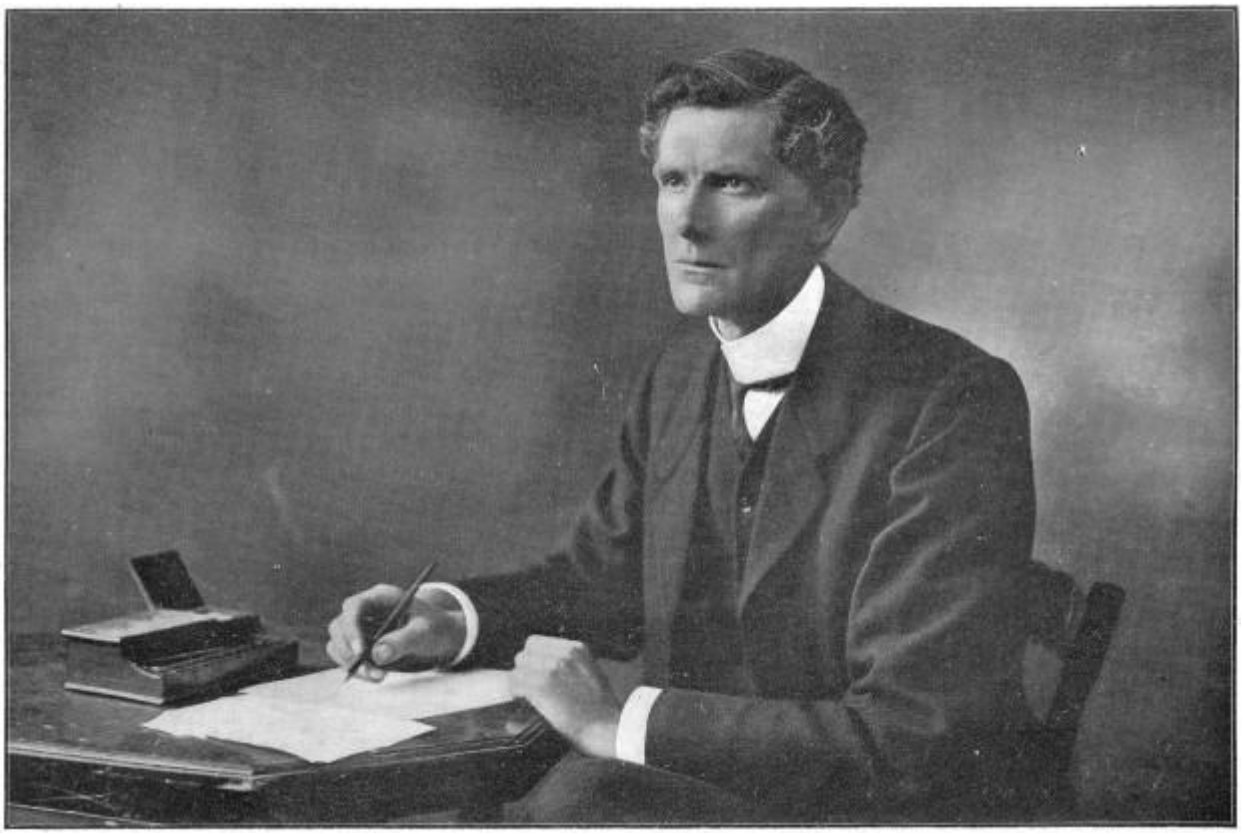
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It started with a mysterious red-legged diving bird, the common merganser *Mergus merganser*, which should not have been in Korea in May. The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York has very few bird specimens from North Korea. This one, AMNH 734284, undated but collected in "Gensan" in 1903, spurred the interest of ornithologists Will Duckworth and Paul Sweet, the latter of whom was the AMNH's ornithology collections manager. The handwriting on the tag was not that of Robert Hall (1867–1949), the Australian ornithologist and collector whose specimens had been sold to Lord Rothschild in Britain, and then subsequently were purchased by AMNH. Where did it come from and who collected it?

AMNH 734284, as it is known in the museum, was the only common merganser (or goosander) known to have been collected from Korea in May—that is, late enough to be *breeding* in Korea, rather than just passing through, so technically native to Korea. In the course of my research on the history of ornithology in Australia, I had discovered the story of Robert Hall's collecting expedition through the voice of his assistant R. E. (Ernie) Trebilcock (1880–1976). Trebilcock, formally trained as a lawyer, was a good naturalist and precise observer, and

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as he travelled with Hall for 10 months in 1903, he kept a daily diary of his activities for his fiancée Hessie Tymms waiting at home in Australia.



Robert Hall, collector of East Asian birds, director of the Tasmanian Museum (ca. 1912).

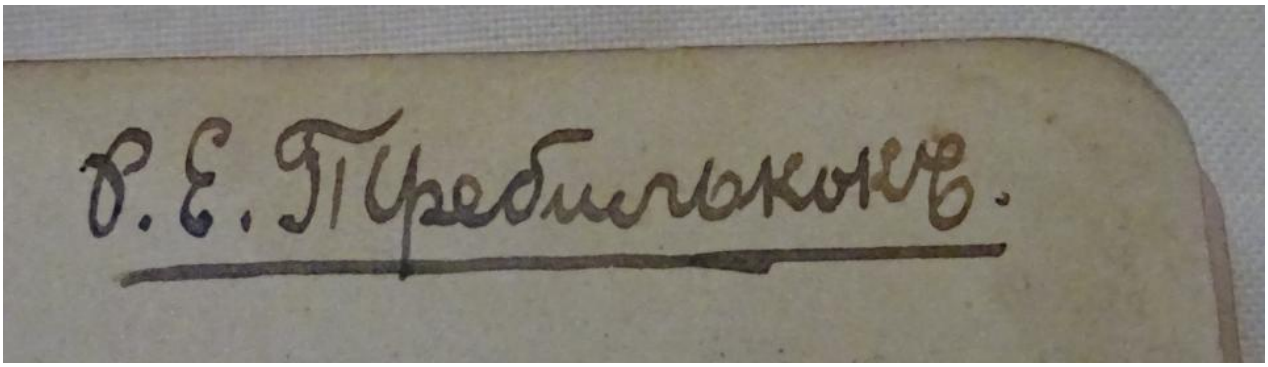
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Robert Hall was an experienced museum collector, and subsequently a museum director. He discovered that the British Museum's ornithological collections lacked Siberian shorebirds and accordingly planned a collection trip, which involved traveling, mostly overland, from Melbourne to London via Vladivostok. He calculated (wrongly, it transpired) that he and his assistant could cover the costs of their long and difficult journey by selling the collection of bird specimens to the museum or British collectors on arrival.

The Australian ornithologists followed the extraordinary journey of the "Australian" shorebirds (some of them as tiny as 5–6 grams) that flew to Siberia for two months every year to breed. They travel along what H. Elliot McClure, the head of the United States Army's *Migratory Animal Pathological Survey*, later dubbed the "East-Asian Flyway." Hall knew of this migratory path and wanted to collect birds in breeding plumage: they have much brighter-coloured feathers when they are breeding than when they are in Australia.

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Trebilcock inscribed his name in the Russian diary in Cyrillic characters.

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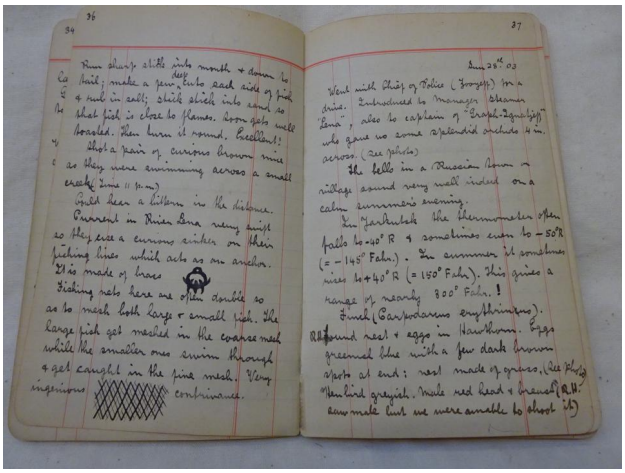
In 2003, the centenary of the Australian bird collectors' trip, I worked with a Russian anthropologist, Anna Sirina, and prepared a translation of Trebilcock's Siberian diary into Russian. Together we mounted an online exhibition about the trip. Anna was excited about the documentary social material from Siberia and used Trebilcock's letters and photographs for her own work on the social anthropology of the local peoples of Siberia. The Korean story had not been relevant to this, so the Korean letters remained unread until the question of the Korean bird arose a few years later.



Mr R. E. Trebilcock discusses his archives with Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU) archivist Tess Kloot in 1975, seven decades after his Siberian adventure.

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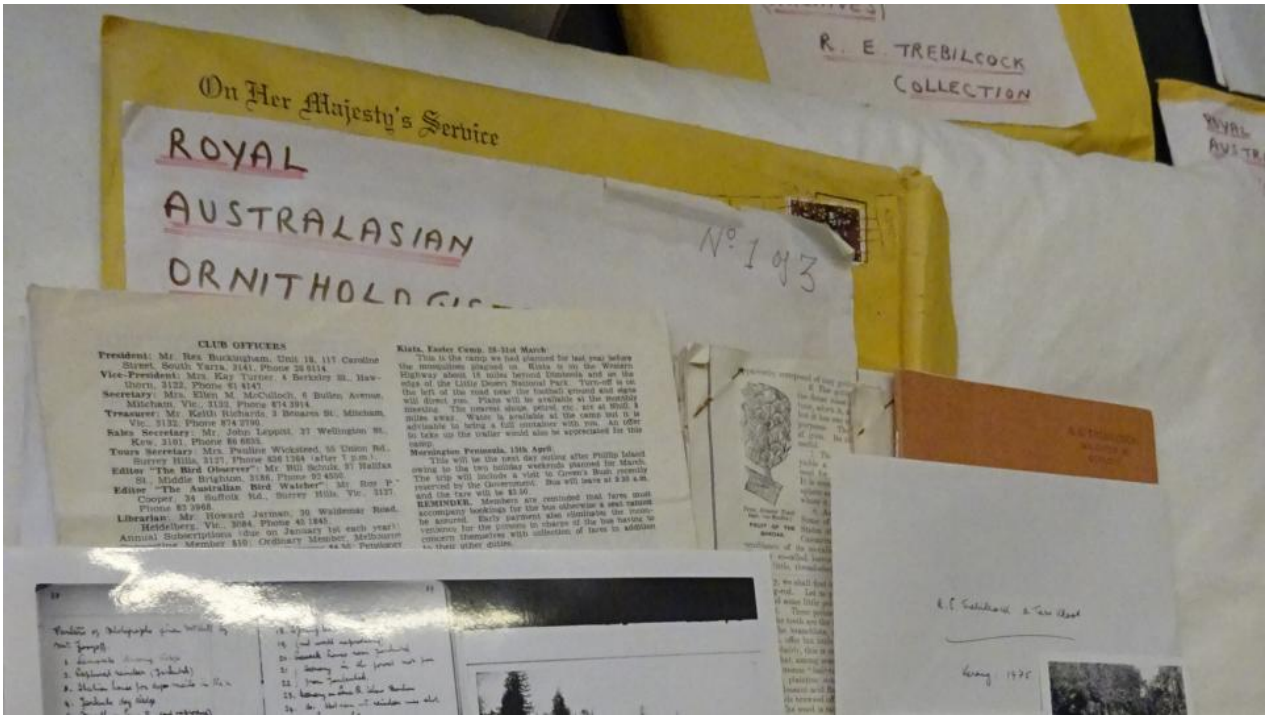


Double page spread from R. E. Trebilcock's diary, June 1903.

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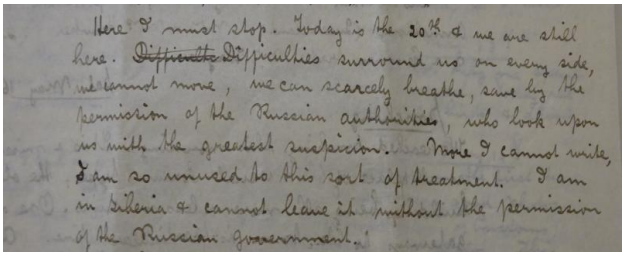


Newspaper cuttings and letters in the Trebilcock collection within the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU) archive, now held in the manuscripts collection of the State Library of Victoria.

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The Korean diary is recorded in letters to Hessie, which were stored with the Siberian diary. The letters are quite personal and detail the many difficulties of arranging travel in Russia.

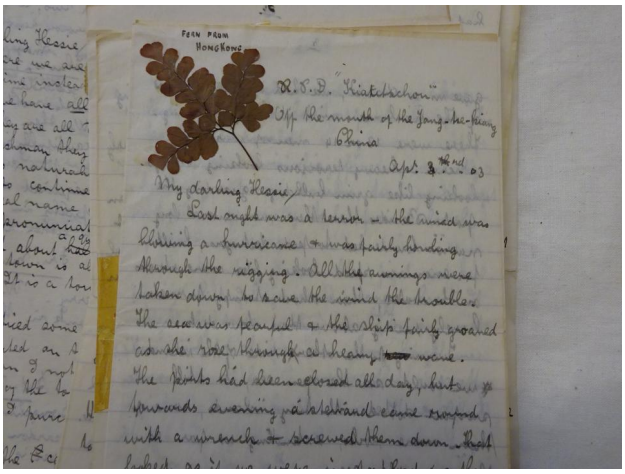

Here I must stop. Today is the 20th & we are still here. ~~Difficult~~ Difficulties surround us on every side, we cannot move, we can scarcely breathe, save by the permission of the Russian authorities, who look upon us with the greatest suspicion. More I cannot write, I am so annoyed to this sort of treatment. I am in Siberia & cannot leave it without the permission of the Russian government.

"Russian authorities look upon us with the greatest suspicion," Ernie wrote to Hessie.

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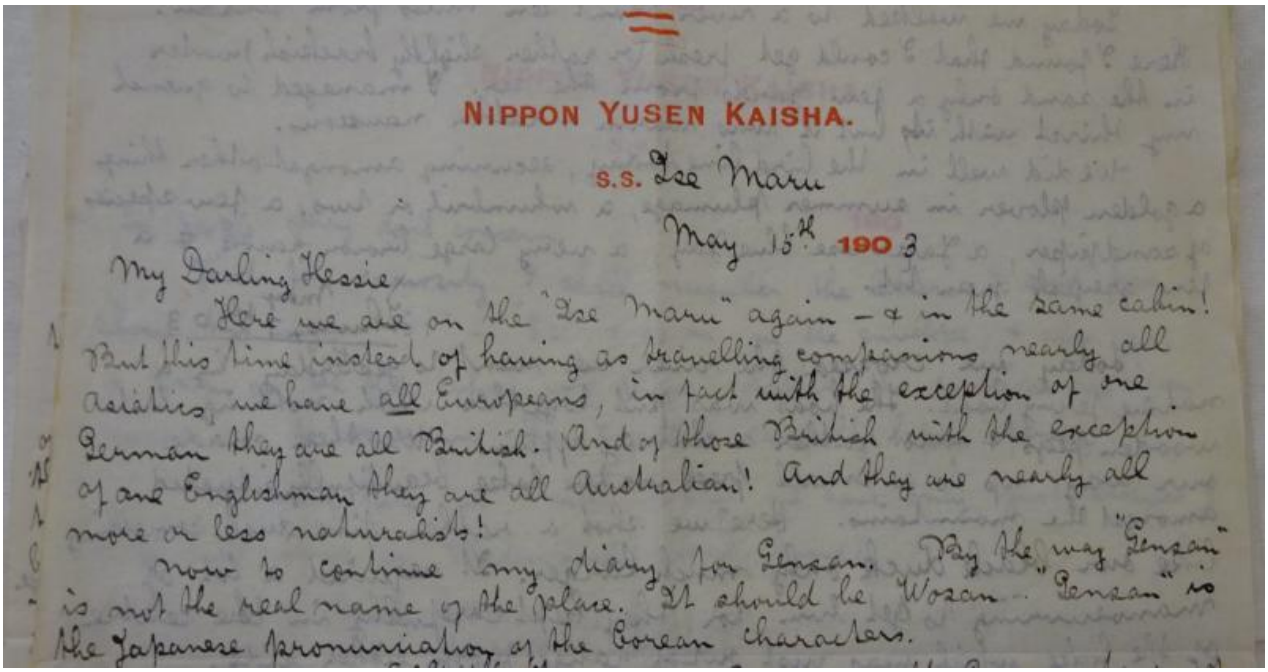
Letters often included souvenirs of his travels.

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When the AMNH asked about the Korean provenance of their specimen, I returned to the letters that described the sea voyage towards Siberia, via Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea. The weather in "Corea" was exceptionally stormy. Hall and Trebilcock had tried to depart from Fusan on 21 April, but it was a full week later, on 28 April 1903, that they made it to Wonsan. The Australians were then unable to sail on to Vladivostok until 16 May, because of what Ernie described as a "hurricane."

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NIPPON YUSEN KAISHA.

S.S. Zee Maru

May 15th 1903

My Darling Hessie

Here we are on the "Zee Maru" again – & in the same cabin! But this time instead of having as travelling companions nearly all Asiatics, we have all Europeans, in fact with the exception of one German they are all British. And of those British with the exception of one Englishman they are all Australian! And they are nearly all more or less naturalists!

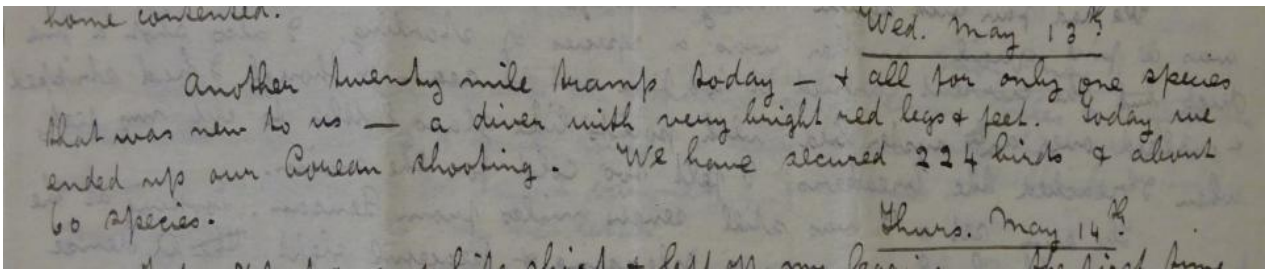
Now to continue my diary for Gensan. By the way "Gensan" is not the real name of the place. It should be Wosan. "Gensan" is the Japanese pronunciation of the Corean characters.

Letter to Hessie describing the passengers on the ship to Vladivostock.

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Whilst in Wonsan, the Australians met members of the English-speaking community, some of whom traveled onwards with them as far as Vladivostok. The local missionary, Mr Foote, acted as Ernie's interpreter at the post office and Mr Wakefield, the local commissioner for customs lent him a darkroom. Ernie was a good photographer and his glass negatives are an important part of the surviving archive. While the weather in Korea was too stormy to sail, it was an unexpected opportunity to collect extra birds. In his letter to Hessie, Trebilcock recorded that the Korean collection comprised 224 birds of 60 species.


Wed. May 13th

another twenty mile tramp today – & all for only one species that was new to us — a diver with very bright red legs & feet. Today we ended up our Corean shooting. We have secured 224 birds & about 60 species.

Thurs. May 14th

Ernie's letter to Hessie details collecting forays from Wonsan, including one on 13 May, where they took one bird of a species "new to us," "a diver with very bright red legs and feet."

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On the Lena River in Siberia.

This photo was taken by R. E. Trebilcock and is part of the State Library of Victoria's digital collection. The permission was granted by the holder of the collection RAOU, which is now Birding Australia. Click here to view State Library of Victoria source.

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Trebilcock's letters and notes reveal how the documentation of the collection was done later during the long shipboard journeys. Times and even places became fixed retrospectively: it was only later on board ship that he learned that the place he knew as Gensan (the Japanese place name) was also called Wonsan (the local Korean name).

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Cover, *Flight of the Emu* (Melbourne University Press, 2001). This was the centenary history of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU, now Birdlife Australia). The RAOU's journal is *The Emu*.

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So the mystery merganser was in fact collected in Korea, probably on 13 May 1903 by Trebilcock, for the Hall Collection. It was almost certainly Ernie's writing on the label. When Paul Sweet and colleagues prepared a definitive list of the Hall Collection from Wonsan, the letter to Hessie confirmed the details on its label. The same hurricane that had created the Australian ornithologists' collecting opportunity also delayed the bird, explaining why, in 1903, it was still in Korea at a time when it was late enough to breed.

Arcadia Collection:
Histories across Species

Further readings:

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- Whittell, Hubert Massey. *The Literature of Australian Birds: A History and a Bibliography of Australian Ornithology*. Perth: Paterson Brokensha, 1954.

Related links:

- Entry for the Common Merganser in *All About Birds* by Cornell University.
  https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common_Merganser/id
- RAOU Manuscript No. 9247, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. (Transcription of Ernie Trebilcock's Diary)
  https://fennerschool-associated.anu.edu.au/siberia/TrebilcockDiary.pdf
- Libby Robin and Anna Sirina's Online Exhibition on "Siberian Ornithology—Australian Style, 1903."
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  http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hall-robert-6529
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  http://www3.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-38/t1-g-t3.html
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  http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM06757.html
- Website of *BirdLife Australia*.
  http://www.birdlife.org.au/
- Website about Professor Libby Robin by the Australian National University (ANU).
  https://researchers.anu.edu.au/researchers/robin-ladq

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Websites linked in image captions:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mergus_merganser,_female_and_male,_Vaxholm,_Sweden.jpg#/media/File:Mergus_merganser,_female_and_male,_Vaxholm,_Sweden.jpg
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- http://search.slv.vic.gov.au/MAIN:Everything:SLV_VOYAGER2542390

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Professor Libby Robin is an historian of science and environmental ideas. She is Professor at the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University and affiliated professor at the National Museum of Australia's People and Environment Research Group and the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm in the Division of History of Science and Technology. Libby has published widely in the history of science, international and comparative environmental history and the ecological humanities. She has won national and international prizes in History (How a Continent Created a Nation), in Zoology (Boom and Bust), and in literature (Flight of the Emu, The Future of Nature). Libby also coordinates (with Cameron Muir) the Australian and New Zealand Environmental History Network, and (with Thom van Dooren) the Australian Environmental Humanities Hub. She is President of the International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations, and a member of the Executive of International History and future Of People on Earth (IHOPE), Stockholm.

She was elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities in 2013.

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