

# A review of bird specimens (eggs clutches and study skins) collected by William Rae McLennan (1882 - 1935)



Ian J. Mason (Canberra) and Elinor C. Scambler (Atherton)

January 2024

Canary White-eye (*Zosterops luteus*) study skins collected by W.R. McLennan in October 1915. Upper (NMV HLW3080): in mangroves, upriver from main camp on north branch of the King River, NT; Lower (NMV HLW3081): in mangroves, just up from junction of south branch of the King River, NT. The specimen labels state 'King River'.

*Photograph by Craig Robertson, NMV (Melbourne) ©NMV (Melbourne, Victoria)*

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We welcome updates and corrections - contact: Ian J. Mason, [ian@ianmason.com.au](mailto:ian@ianmason.com.au)



Barking Owl (*Ninox connivens*) - C/2 (NMV BE1281) collected by W.R. McLennan on 13 August 1911 on the Gwindi track, near head of Gwindi Creek, ca.3km SSW of Piara, north CYP. Set marks state 'C. York' and the NMV (Melbourne) database 'Piara area'.

Photograph by Craig Robertson, NMV (Melbourne) ©NMV (Melbourne, Victoria)

# A review of bird specimens (eggs clutches and study skins) collected by William Rae McLennan (1882 - 1935)

Mason, Ian J. (Canberra) and Scambler, Elinor C. (Atherton) January 2024

## INTRODUCTION

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**William Rae McLennan**  
**(1882 - 1935)<sup>1</sup>**  
*Austral Avian Record* **5 (1)**  
(1922)  
(plate between pp. 106-107)

There have been a number of biographies by Whittell (1954), Paton (1979); Noske (2017), and Mason and Pfitzner (2021, 2022) - and general accounts written about William R. McLennan's exploits while professionally engaged by Dr William D.K. MacGillivray (1867-1933), Gregory M. Mathews (1876-1949) and Henry L. White (1860-1927). However, little has been discussed in detail about linking his specimens (bird study skins and egg clutches) to specific collecting locations. MacGillivray (1917, 1918a,b) and White (1917a,b) have recounted his Western Queensland, Claudie River, Qld, King-Roper River, NT and CYP (White 1922a,b) expeditions and generally discussed the specimens that he collected and Archibald J. Campbell (1920, 1922), Alfred J. North (1912) and White (1922a,b) have also published information on individual specimens. Recently, several authors - Greenway (1973, 1978), LeCroy (2008, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2017), Noske (2017), Barram and Scambler (2022), Webster *et al.* (2022), Crowley and Garnett (2023) and Scambler *et al.* (2023) - have discussed some of his observations and specimens but until now, no one has attempted to match his diary accounts [Queensland Museum (Brisbane) and RAOU archive (SLV, Melbourne)] to specimens. Most of these specimens are in the Australian Museum, Sydney (MacGillivray egg collection); South Australian Museum, Adelaide (MacGillivray bird study skin collection), NMV, Melbourne (H.L. White bird study skin and egg collections) and American Museum of Natural History, New York (G.M. Mathews bird study skin collection). Interestingly, ever an opportunist, McLennan also collected insects (mainly moths, butterflies and beetles), and the odd reptile and mammal specimen, presumably to sell to supplement his income - we have not attempted to locate any of this latter material. Many of the nest vouchers McLennan collected have not yet been examined or catalogued [pers. comm. Karen Roberts, NMV (Melbourne)], and we look forward to reviewing them in future.

In the following dialogue we have attempted to locate most of McLennan's bird study skins and egg clutches and link them with his diary accounts, to improve the collection location data - which in most cases, is very general on his collection labels (*e.g.* Coen, and the Claudie, King, Roper, Watson and Archer Rivers). Many of McLennan's specimens have not been attributed to him and we have also identified some specimens which should be attributed jointly or solely to other collectors, including his field assistants, some of them indigenous.

We have not transcribed McLennan's daily diary accounts verbatim, as many of these accounts are extremely lengthy - but instead, we have paraphrased parts of his text to assist us in tying his specimens to specific locations. McLennan utilised the RAOU (1913) Checklist, or occasionally Hall's (1899) Key, for common and scientific names in his diary accounts. We follow the International Ornithological Congress (IOC 2023) for common and scientific names of the museum specimens listed and where appropriate, we have used them in paraphrasing McLennan's diary extracts. Where no specimen has been confirmed, we retain McLennan's common or scientific names. As it would have been too much of a task to tackle the data errors in the Atlas of Living Australia, VertNet and Queensland Government WildNet databases, we have concentrated on correcting the museum database errors and hope that they will flow through to other public outlets online. All the map details have been overlaid on and downloaded from Google Earth.

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### Endnote:

1. William (Willrae) Rae McLennan was born at Sandford, ca.10km southeast of Casterton, western Victoria, on 20 August 1882 and died at Casterton, Victoria, on 22 September 1935. Many hundreds of egg clutches and study skins can be attributed to McLennan, during his active collecting years from 1901 to 1923. He “can only be described as one of Australia’s outstanding pioneers and field ornithologists of his time” (Mason and Pfitzner 2020: 362).

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