Birds in a tree: A journey through avian phylogeny, with particular emphasis on the birds of New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Two main themes to the avian research presented in this thesis are, 
1. Deep resolution of birds generally, and
2. Investigation of specific aspects of the New Zealand avifauna.
More specifically, this thesis covers phylogeny, and predictions about palaeognaths, pigeons, pelecaniforms and passerines.

Significant progress is made in resolving the basal branches of Neoaves. This thesis examines whether the six-way basal Neoavian split of Cracraft (2001) is, in principle, resolvable. New mitochondrial genomes are added to improve taxon sampling, break up long branches, and allow testing of the prior assumptions of six Neoavian groups. This research shows the six-way split is resolvable, although more work is required for specific details. From a life-history perspective, it is interesting that the two bird-of-prey groups (falcons and buzzards) are very divergent, and may not be sister groups. Molecular dating supports major diversification of at least 12 Neoavian lineages in the Late Cretaceous. Additionally, novel avian mitochondrial gene orders are investigated and a hypothesis put forward suggesting gene conversion and stable intermediate forms allows an apparently rare event (gene rearrangement) to occur multiple times within Neoaves.

One of Cracraft’s six groups, informally called the ‘Conglomerati’, is particularly difficult to resolve. The pigeons (Columbiformes) lie within the ‘Conglomerati’, and this chapter examines two aspects along the continuum of pigeon evolution. Firstly the large South Pacific fruit pigeon radiation is examined with mid-length mitochondrial sequences. This clade contains a third of all pigeon species, and has been very successful in island colonisation throughout South East Asia and the Pacific. Secondly, candidates for the closest relative of pigeons are tested using analysis of whole mitochondrial genomes. Highest support was found for the grouping of sandgrouse and pigeon, although they are clearly very divergent.

Also within the ‘Conglomerati’ is the traditional order Pelecaniformes, and their close allies the Ciconiiformes. These orders (the P&C) are part of an adaptive radiation of seabird water-carnivores, including loons, penguins, petrels and albatrosses. This group is separate from the large shorebird water-carnivore group; although both appear to have begun radiating abut 70 million years ago. The
tropicbird represents a separate, convergent life history and is not part of the Pelecaniformes, nor within the larger seabird water-carnivore group.

Resolution of the basal phylogeny of oscine passerines is important for interpreting the radiation of this group out of the Australasian region. Many endemic New Zealand oscine passerines belong to ‘basal corvid’ lineages, but have not previously been investigated with mitochondrial DNA. This chapter shows that many ‘basal corvid’ lineages are actually ‘basal passerine’ lineages, and there is a discrepancy between nuclear Rag-1 phylogenies (the most commonly used gene in passerine phylogenetics) and other phylogenies, including mitochondrial, that requires further investigation.

Taken as a whole, this thesis adds significantly to our understanding of the evolution of birds, and provides a foundation for future research, not only of phylogenetic relationships, but also of avian life history, long-term niche stability and macroevolution.
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# Table of Contents

**Abstract**

**Acknowledgements**

**List of Figures**

**List of Tables**

## 1. Chapter One

*Introduction*

1.1. **Structure of the Thesis**

1.2. **Background**

  1.2.1. Mitochondrial DNA – why is it useful for phylogeny?  
  1.2.2. Alignments  
  1.2.3. Model choice, rates across sites  
  1.2.4. Gene trees vs. species trees  
  1.2.5. Consilience of induction, generating hypotheses and testing predictions

1.3. **What do we do when we know the tree of life?**

  1.3.1. Are the processes of microevolution sufficient to explain macroevolution?  
  1.3.2. Evolutionary-Stable Niche-Discontinuity (ESND)

1.4. **Contributions of others to this these publications**

1.5. **References**

## 2. Chapter Two

*Vicars, tramps and the assembly of New Zealand avifauna – A review of molecular phylogenetic evidence.*

2.1. **Abstract**

2.2. **Introduction**

  2.2.1. A Brief History Of New Zealand  
  2.2.2. Overview Of The New Zealand Avifauna

2.3. **Molecular View Of The NZ Avifauna**

  2.3.1. Phylogeny of birds  
  2.3.2. Birds in New Zealand

2.4. **Discussion**
### Table of Contents

2.4.1. Accumulation and Radiation  
2.4.2. A Zealandian element?  
2.4.3. Disharmony & Extinction  
2.4.4. Dating diversification  

2.5. Conclusion  

2.6. Acknowledgements  

2.7. References  

2.8. Supplementary Material  

3. Chapter Three  

Mitochondrial Genomes and Avian Phylogeny: Complex Characters and Resolvability without Explosive Radiations  

3.1. Abstract  

3.2. Introduction  

3.3. Materials and Methods  

3.3.1. Phylogenetic Analysis  

3.4. Results  

3.4.1. Phylogenetic Analysis  

3.5. Discussion  

3.6. Acknowledgements  

3.7. References  

4. Chapter Four  

Two aspects along the continuum of pigeon evolution: a South-Pacific radiation and the relationship of pigeons within Neoaves  

4.1. Abstract  

4.2. Introduction  

4.2.1. A South East Asian/Pacific radiation of pigeons.  

4.2.2. The closest relative of Pigeons.  

4.2.3. Nuclear versus Mitochondrial DNA and the problem of introns in deep phylogeny  

4.3. Methods  

4.3.1. Taxon sampling  

vi
### 4.3.2. DNA extraction and PCR 119
### 4.3.3. Phylogenetic analyses 120

**4.4. RESULTS** 123

- **4.4.1. A South East Asian/Pacific radiation within Pigeons** 123
- **4.4.2. Phylogenetic relationships of Pigeons within Neoaves** 126

**4.5. DISCUSSION** 129

- **4.5.1. The Ducula–Ptilinopus radiation in a biogeographic context** 129
- **4.5.2. Closest relative of Pigeons** 132

**4.6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** 133

**4.7. REFERENCES** 133

---

**5. Chapter Five**

*Beyond Phylogeny: Pelecaniform and Ciconiiform Birds, and Long-Term Niche Stability*

**5.1. ABSTRACT** 139

**5.2. INTRODUCTION** 140

- **5.2.1. Consilience of Induction** 140
- **5.2.2. History of the Pelecaniformes** 141

**5.3. METHODS** 144

- **5.3.1. Taxon Sampling, DNA Extraction, PCR and Sequencing** 144
- **5.3.2. Species for Analysis** 145
- **5.3.3. Alignment** 146
- **5.3.4. Phylogenetic Analyses and Tree Building** 146
- **5.3.5. Molecular Dating** 147

**5.4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION** 147

- **5.4.1. Details of New Mitochondrial Genomes and Gene Orders** 147
- **5.4.2. Implications of Core Pelecaniform Gene Duplications for Phylogenetic Studies** 148
- **5.4.3. Phylogenetic Analyses** 150
- **5.4.4. Resolution of the Core Pelecaniforms** 152
- **5.4.5. The Pelican is not a Pelecaniform** 153
- **5.4.6. The predicted P&C Group** 155
- **5.4.7. The Nature of the Tropicbird** 156
- **5.4.8. Molecular Dating** 157
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.4.9. Water-Carnivory in Neoaves, Adaptive Radiations and Niche</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7. REFERENCES</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8. APPENDIX 1</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8.1. Predicting the probabilities of observing splits in a new dataset.</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Chapter Six</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand Passerines Help Resolve Basal Oscine Phylogeny.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1. ABSTRACT</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1. Oscine biogeography</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2. Limitations of current deep oscine phylogenetic resolution</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3. METHODS</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1. DNA extraction, PCR and sequencing of modern samples</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2. Ancient DNA protocols</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3. Alignment</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4. Phylogenetic Analyses</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4. RESULTS &amp; DISCUSSION</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.1. Mitogenomic features</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.2. Phylogenetic analyses</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.3. Ancient DNA sequence verification</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.4. Phylogenetic analysis of the piopio with broader oscine sampling</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5. FUTURE WORK</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5.1. Dating Passeriformes</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8. REFERENCES</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9. SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Chapter Seven</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Summation</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1. FUTURE DIRECTIONS: TO PHYLOGENY AND BEYOND</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2. REFERENCES</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Appendix One


9. Appendix Two

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1.1 Five models for the divergence of birds and placental mammals. 6
FIGURE 1.2 Evolutionarily-stable niche-discontinuity between two taxa. 7
FIGURE 2.1 New Zealand and neighbouring islands 15
FIGURE 2.2 Geological timescale 16
FIGURE 2.3 Phylogeny of birds based on multiple genes 21
FIGURE 2.4 Phylogeny of passerine diversity 35
FIGURE 2.5 The effect of taxon sampling on tree interpretation 45
FIGURE 3.1 Gene orders found in avian mitochondrial genome control regions 88
FIGURE 3.2 Comparison between CR(1) and CR(2) in Aracari (A) and Osprey (B) 97
FIGURE 3.3 Primers used to sequence duplicate tThr-CR gene order 98
FIGURE 3.4 Maximum Likelihood tree of 40 birds 100
FIGURE 3.5 Consensus network for 27 Neovavian birds 102
FIGURE 4.1 Phylogeny of pigeons with emphasis on the SE Asia/Pacific radiation 124
FIGURE 4.2 Bayesian rooted consensus tree of pigeons 123
FIGURE 4.3 Maximum likelihood tree of birds 127
FIGURE 5.1 Comparison of duplicated regions in the three core Pelecaniformes 148
FIGURE 5.2 Maximum likelihood tree from analysis using RAxML, with 31 taxa 150
FIGURE 5.3 Consensus network of the four analytical methods 151
FIGURE 5.4 Maximum likelihood tree from analyses using RAxML of 35 taxa 152
FIGURE 5.5 Maximum clade credibility chronogram of the 31 taxa dataset 158
FIGURE 6.1 Unrooted maximum likelihood analysis of mt genome dataset 178
FIGURE 6.2 Network of Bayesian analysis 180
FIGURE 6.3 Network of Bayesian analysis without *Turnagra* U51734 182
FIGURE 6.4 Consensus cladograms of passerine phylogeny 184
FIGURE S6.1 Piopio specimen *Turnagra capensis* 190
FIGURE 7.1 Network showing splits over 20% of RAxML bootstrap analysis 194
**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 2.1</td>
<td>New Zealand native passerine diversity and endemicity</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE S2.1</td>
<td>Latin Names of Birds</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE S2.2</td>
<td>Peer reviewed publications reporting application of molecular data to New Zealand birds</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 4.1</td>
<td>Accession numbers and mt genes included in analysis of pigeon phylogeny</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 4.2</td>
<td>Accession numbers and species names for birds used in complete mt genome analyses</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 4.3</td>
<td>Testing alternative hypotheses about pigeon relatives using the SH test</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 5.1</td>
<td>Characters previously used to group pelecaniform families</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE 6.1</td>
<td>Genbank accessions of additional samples used in piopio analyses</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>