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Validity of Bartram's Painted Vulture (Aves: Cathartidae)

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Abstract

William Bartram described the Painted Vulture (*Vultur sacra*) as a new species in his 1791 book on travels in Florida and other southeastern states. However, no specimen of this bird survives, and it has not been reported by any subsequent ornithologist. Bartram's detailed description is not presently endorsed by the American Ornithologists' Union and has been widely regarded as a myth, a misdescribed King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa* (Linnaeus), a misdescribed Northern Caracara *Caracara cheriway* (Jacquin), or a garbled mixture of species. In fact, his description bears almost no resemblance to a Northern Caracara, but it does match the King Vulture in all important respects except tail color (which is uniform dark brown in all ages and sexes of King Vultures but was white with a dark brown or black tip in Bartram's description). Most 20th century ornithologists commenting on Bartram's bird have been reluctant to accept his description because of the tail-color discrepancy. Only McAtee (1942) concluded that his description could be fully accurate as written, indicating a bird closely related to, but different from, a typical King Vulture.

Paralleling Bartram's description is an apparently independent account and painting of a vulture of uncertain geographic origin by Eleazar Albin (1734). Details of Albin's description, including tail color, are very similar to those of Bartram's description. The only discrepancies are minor differences in color of softparts and tail that seem explicable as intraspecific variation. Available evidence suggests that Bartram knew nothing of Albin's description, and if so, Albin's bird provides quite persuasive support for the validity of Bartram's bird. Equally important, none of the arguments offered historically against the validity of the Painted Vulture is persuasive when examined closely. Together, these and other factors make a strong case for acceptance of Bartram's Painted Vulture as a historic resident of northern Florida and likely other adjacent regions.

Key words: King Vulture, Painted Vulture, Warwovwen, *Vultur sacra*, *Sarcoramphus papa*, *Sarcoramphus sacra*, *Sarcoramphus sacer*, William Bartram, Eleazar Albin, George Edwards, J. A. Allen, Francis Harper

Introduction

In his volume on his explorations of the southeastern states in the 1770s, William Bartram (1791) of Philadelphia described a colorful new vulture that he evidently had observed along the St. John's River of northeastern Florida. He called this species the Painted Vulture *Vultur sacra*, and his description detailed characteristics quite similar to those of the King Vulture *Sarcoramphus papa* (Linnaeus) of the tropical New World. Naturalists who followed Bartram to northern Florida, including Audubon and Nuttall in the 1830s, failed to encounter the species, and, perhaps mostly because of this and the absence of any extant specimen of the bird, its validity has been widely questioned in more modern times. A number of authors (e.g., Allen 1871, Maynard 1881, Howell 1932, Robertson & Woolfenden 1992) concluded that Bartram's bird was potentially imaginary, a mingled description of several species, or a misdescribed Northern Caracara *Caracara cheriway* (Jacquin). Harper (1936) believed that Bartram had encountered a typical King Vulture, but for some reason was mistaken in its tail color, a conclusion supported by Palmer (1988). In its most recent checklist, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU 1998) considers evidence for King Vultures in Florida (i.e., Bartram's description) to be unconvincing, citing Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) and rejecting the position of Harper (1936).