

The Giant Elephant Bird

John Hawkins

The recent discovery of eggs, supposedly of the *Aepyornis Maximus* (the Great Elephant bird of Madagascar) on the West Australian coast, could be considerably more significant than first meets the eye. One may marvel at their survival of a journey across the Indian Ocean and the pounding they would have received upon landing. Just as marvellous is their discovery by chance before becoming enveloped by the sand dunes.

The discovery of a second large ratite egg on the West Australian coast begs the question, whether there was an Australian bird similar in scale to the extinct *Aepyornis Maximus* and Moa, that is, ten to fifteen feet tall and two to four times the weight of an ostrich.

The *Aepyornis Maximus* was a member of the ratite family, distinguishable by their keel-less breastbones, and hence were unable to fly. The extinct members of this family are *Aepyornis Maximus* of Madagascar and the Slender Moa (*Dinornis torosus*), Greater Broad-billed Moa (*Euryapteryx gravis*) and Lesser Megalapteryx (*Megalapteryx didinus*) all from the South Island of New Zealand. The surviving members are the Rhea of South America, three species of Kiwi of New Zealand, the Emu and Cassowarie of Australia and New Guinea and the Ostrich of South Africa.

The *Aepyornis*'s eggs are probably at the limit of egg technology; they could not be bigger or thicker without preventing the chick pecking its way out. Of the 43 surviving examples, there are only estimated to be three undamaged in private hands, one of which I purchased in Paris and exhibited at Olympia in London in June 1993 – see illustration on the back cover. All the other eggs are in European institutions. Collected since their appearance in the western world in 1851, when Captain Abadie brought three to Paris from the French colony of Madagascar, they immediately became a great curio in the natural history world.

Two were acquired at auction before 1910 by Lord Rothschild for his natural history collection at Tring, costing in excess of GBP250 each, the

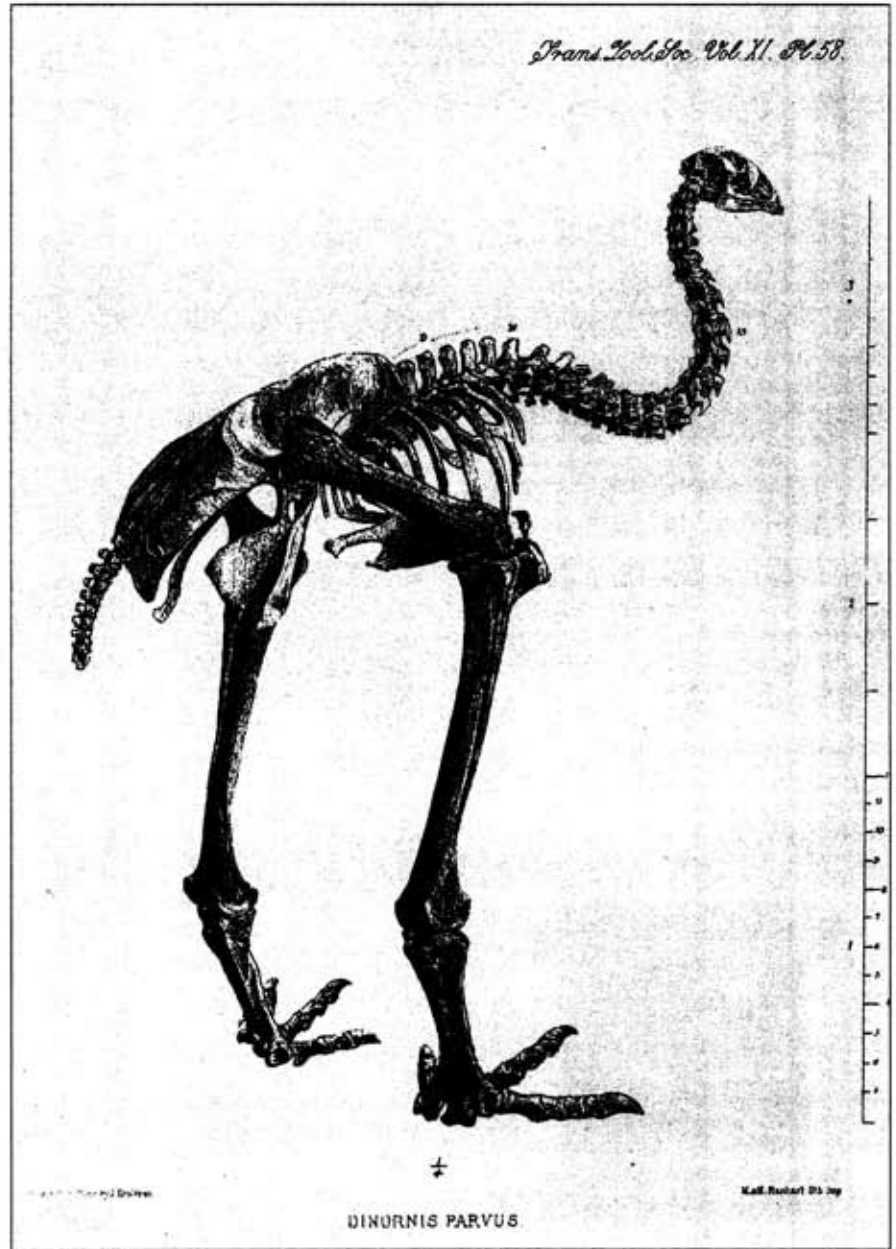


Plate 58, Transactions of The Zoological Society of London, Vol XI - Part 8, January 1883
(see illustration of the egg on back cover)

equivalent of a reasonably substantial house at the time.

After Baudin's expedition to Australia in 1793 a pair of Kangaroo Island emus were presented to the Empress Josephine, one of which was stuffed after its death in 1822, and is the only known survivor, dead or alive.

It is not outside the realms of possibility that another small colony of ratites may have existed on the West

Australian coast, and I suggest that the distinction in size between an emu and a giant bird could have passed unnoticed by European researchers.

I am willing to bet that somewhere on the West Australian coast skeletal remains will be discovered to confirm my theory. The Australian *Aepyornis Maximus* *Hawkensia* can then withdraw its head from the sand.