

Australasia--Ptilonorhynchidae: split *Amblyornis germanus* (Huon Bowerbird) from *Amblyornis macgregoriae* (MacGregor's Bowerbird)

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AusRAG committee input from Guy Dutton, Anna Kearns and Leo Joseph

Huon Bowerbird *Amblyornis germanus* is a proposed split from *A. macgregoriae* based on distinctive bower construction, morphology, and molecular differences.

The current AviList v2025 taxonomy is:

English name	Sciname and authority	Range
MacGregor's Bowerbird	<i>Amblyornis macgregoriae</i> De Vis, CW, 1890	New Guinea ranges, exclusive of Bird's Head and Foja Mts.
	<i>Amblyornis macgregoriae mayri</i> Hartert, EJO, 1930	montane west-central and central New Guinea (Weyland, Nassau, and Jayawijaya mountains)
	<i>Amblyornis macgregoriae macgregoriae</i> De Vis, CW, 1890	montane east-central to northeastern (Adelbert Mountains) and southeastern New Guinea
	<i>Amblyornis macgregoriae germanus</i> Rothschild, LW, 1910	mountains of Huon Peninsula (northeastern New Guinea)

The accepted spelling, *Amblyornis (macgregoriae) germanus*, vs. *germana*, follows Schodde & Bock 2016.

A “Yardstick”. In considering this split, it’s important to start by noting that *Amblyornis macgregoriae*, specifically nominate *A. m. macgregoriae*, co-occurs with *A. subalaris* in SE New Guinea, where the former inhabits cloud forest at higher elevations and the later populates the drier mid-mountain forests at lower elevation. Elsewhere on the Main Ranges of New Guinea, *A. macgregoriae* occurs alone. So, a “yardstick” comparison between those two sympatric species and allopatric *A. germanus*, which evolved isolated

from both species on the Huon Peninsula where it spans both cloud forest and mid-mountain forests habitats at 1,660–2,940 m elevation (Beehler & Pratt 2016), is useful.

Behaviour. The distinctive bower of this regional isolate supports its elevation to species status (Coates & Peckover 2001:209, Pratt & Beehler 2014: plate 67a). The following description is excerpted and modified from Beehler & Pratt 2016:278. Although *Amblyornis* bowers can show variability by individual and population, the bower of *germanus* is consistently different from that of *macgregoriae* in numerous features and is easily recognizable. Whereas *A. macgregoriae* places its bower on the crest of the ridge, the bower of *A. germanus* is built on the slope below the ridge crest. This placement resembles that of *A. subalaris* of the Southeastern Peninsula of New Guinea. In addition, the *germanus* bower faces downslope (again like *subalaris*), showing a decorated bower “face” that is absent from the circular bower of *A. macgregoriae*. The platform of the bower of *A. macgregoriae* is constructed of moss and is defined by a moss perimeter. By contrast, the bower of *A. germanus* exhibits a perimeter of sticks that surrounds a mushroom-shaped head of sticks atop the central moss wall, the wall being the site of much decoration with small, colored items. With its decorated wall, the bower of *A. germanus* is once more similar to that of *A. subalaris*.

Figure 1. Reproduction of Plate 67A, Pratt and Beehler 2014: a comparison of *Amblyornis* bowers. The bowers are *A. inornata* (top left), *A. subalaris* (top right), *A. flavifrons* (bottom right), *A. macgregoriae* (center), and *A. germanus* (bottom right).



Voice. A comparative study of the vocalizations of *Amblyornis* species has not been undertaken. These birds give a variety of harsh advertisement calls, and those given at the bower including mimicry of other birds and environmental sounds.

Morphology. While the plumage is essentially the same as *macgregoriae*, morphometric distinctions of *germanus* include smaller size and short wing and crest (Frith & Frith 2004). Unfortunately, no single source gives all the necessary comparative measurements for relevant *Amblyornis* taxa, so these had to be cobbled together from different publications. Frith & Frith 2004 give the male wing for *germanus* as 124-135 mm (N=11) vs. *macgregoriae* (127-145) mm (N=many). Although the exceptionally short crest of *germanus* relative to various subspecies of *A. macgregoriae* is invariably mentioned as a diagnoseable character state, actual measurements of the crest were unexpectedly not provided in any of the following primary sources: Rothschild 1910, Diamond 1972, Schodde & McKean 1973, Cooper & Forshaw 1977, and Frith & Frith 2004. Only Gilliard 1969 delivered the goods: “crest 43-48 (mm from the posterior base), wing 127-133 (mm)” vs. for *macgregoriae* crest

51-73 mm, wing 129-142. These figures yielded a ratio of median crest-to-wing of 0.35 for *germanus* vs. 0.42 for *macgregoriae*. So, yes, *germanus* has an absolute and proportionately shorter crest than *macgregoriae* and a smaller body size, based on the shorter wing.



Figure 2. Male *Amblyornis germanus* by Szabolcs Kokay.

Compared with *A. subalaris*, *germanus* lacks that species' diagnostic pale, namesake streaking on the underparts. The measurements of the two species are small compared with *macgregoriae*: Frith & Frith give the male wing for *subalaris* as 121-130 (n = 30). This time it's Schodde & McKean 1973 who give both wing and crest measurements for male *subalaris*: 115-126 mm and 37-42 mm, respectively. While it might be tempting to wonder if the shared smaller size and shorter crest points to perhaps a sister relationship between these two congeners, the striking plumage difference, bower-type, and genetics indicate otherwise.

Genetics. The first molecular analysis to indicate *germanus* is divergent from *A. macgregoriae* at the species level was Benz (2011). Subsequent molecular phylogenies of bowerbirds have confirmed this result and established that the *germanus* and *macgregoriae* are sister clades and their divergence is comparable to other divergences within *Amblyornis* (Ericson et al. 2020, Ericson et al. 2022). The tree reported by Ericson et al. 2022 shows *A. subalaris* to be basal to all other *Amblyornis* taxa + *Archboldia*. (It's worthwhile mentioning here that all genetic papers that included *Archboldia* sampled different specimens and independently reported the same unpalatable finding that *Archboldia papuana* is well nested within the genus *Amblyornis*—a topic AviList may want to take up at some point.)

History of the Split. Interestingly, the similarity of *germanus* with *A. subalaris* was noted right from the beginning, when Rothschild described the taxon as a subspecies of *subalaris*, not *A. macgregoriae*, despite his being in possession at the time of ample series of the latter species. Based on only one available adult female study skin and the detached crest of a male, the description reads: “*Amblyornis subalaris germanus*, subsp. n. Adult female: Slightly darker and more rufescent than the female of *A. subalaris subalaris*, the feathers of the throat being uniform, while in the latter they have a paler median line and dark brown edges. [Measurements.] Crest of male like that of *A. s. subalaris*.” He also mentions the similarity of *germanus* to *subalaris* in “small size of the bill and wings” and goes on to describe subtle differences in colouration.

Mayr (1941) correctly recognized the closer relationship with *macgregoriae* when he classified Huon Bowerbird as *A. m. germanus*. For the next sixty years, subsequent authors followed Mayr’s classification until Coates & Peckover 2001:209 proposed splitting off *germanus* based on the general points given above. Summarizing genetic conclusions regarding *A. macgregoriae*, Ericson et al. 2022:2567 agreed: “The closely related Huon Bowerbird *Amblyornis germana* is sometimes regarded as a seventh subspecies of *A. macgregoriae*, but is genetically distinct from that (Benz, 2011; Ericson et al., 2020; this study).” Many authors since Coates & Peckover 2001 have followed suit (LeCroy 2014; Pratt & Beehler 2014; Beehler & Pratt 2016; Gregory 2017,2025). But acceptance by world checklists has lagged, with the Howard & Moore Checklist (Dickinson & Christidis 2014), Clements Checklist 2023, and HBW and BirdLife International checklist 2025 not accepting the split, whereas only the IOC checklist (2023) did accept it.

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Recommendation

Four AusRAG committee members reviewed this proposal and support the below recommendation.

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