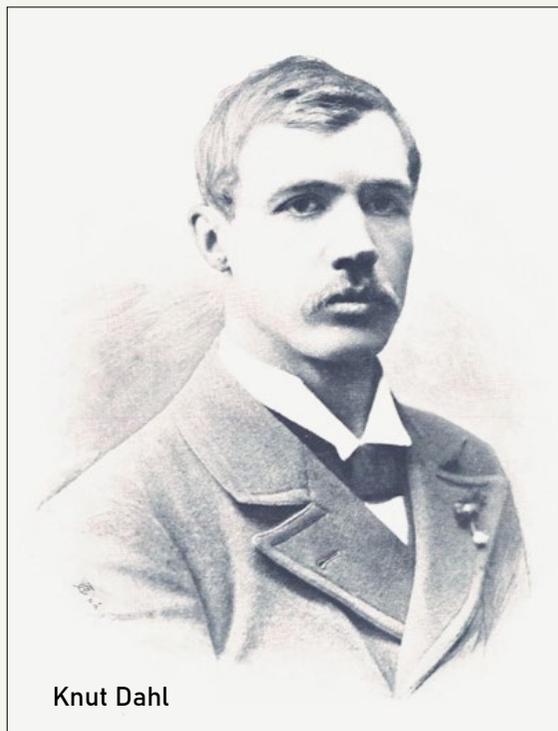


**A review of biological specimens collected in northern Australia
by Knut Dahl (1871 - 1951)**

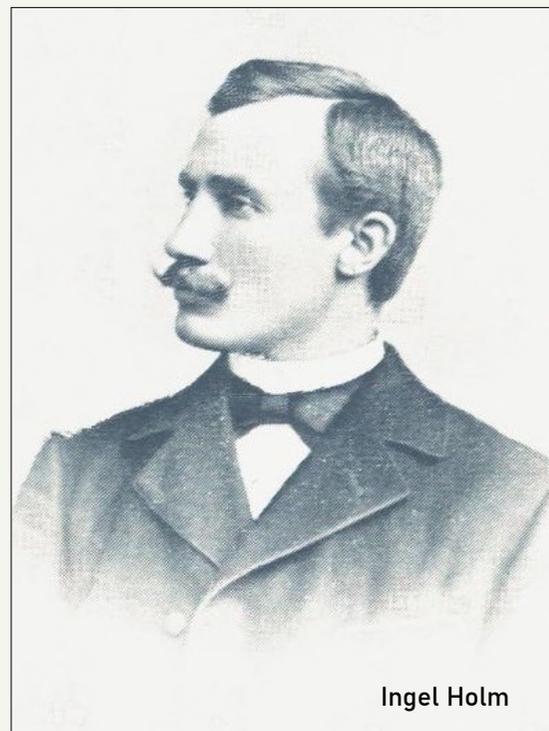


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December 2025



Knut Dahl



Ingel Holm

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We welcome updates and corrections - contact: Ian J. Mason, ian@ianmason.com.au

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C O V E R I M A G E S

Rock Ringtail Possum *Petropseudes dahli* (as *Pseudochirus dahli*), or ‘Wogoit’

Painting by Knut Dahl, lithograph by Joseph Smit, printed by Mintern Bros. Source: Plate XXIII in Collett, R. (1897)

Sketches of Dahl and Holm after returning from their Australian expedition (1894-1896)

Artist unknown: public domain, courtesy NHMO (Norway). Source: Dahl, K. (1898)

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A review of biological specimens collected in northern Australia by Knut Dahl (1871 - 1951)

Mason, Ian J. (Canberra), Scambler, Elinor C. (Atherton) and Johannessen, Lars Erik (Natural History Museum, Oslo, Norway)

INTRODUCTION



Knut Dahl in Arnhem
Land, Northern Territory,
Australia, 1894

Photographer probably Ingel
Olsen Holm
(CC BY-SA 4.0: see page vi)

In 1893, Knut Dahl - a young zoologist from the University of Oslo, Norway - was funded by Jørgen Young (who also sponsored explorer Roald Amundsen) to undertake a scientific expedition to South Africa and northern Australia, to collect specimens for the University's Zoological Museum. In March 1894, accompanied by his taxidermist Ingel Olsen Holm, Dahl left Port Natal (Durban) and journeyed to Australia, sailing from Adelaide to Sydney and then on to Darwin, Northern Territory in June. From Darwin, Dahl and Holm travelled by rail to Fountain Head railway station and after acquiring horses from Glencoe Cattle Station, made their way to the (New) Uniya Mission Station

on the Daly River, where they were located between July-October 1894. From there, they apparently made trips by dinghy on the river (upstream to Margaret Fall and downstream to Alligator Point) and visited Hermit Hill. Dahl then visited Mount Shoobridge (October-November), Adelaide River (December) and then travelled to the Victoria River (depot) in April 1895, returning to Glencoe and trekking to the upper headwaters of the Mary, South Alligator and Katherine Rivers (May-July) before sailing to Broome, Western Australia in October 1895, via Batavia and Singapore. They collected around Broome (Roebuck Bay: confined to Hill Station, ca.18km north of Broome, and Loomingoon Station, ca.40km ENE of Broome) and eventually departed from Australia on the *Saladin* in March 1896 - arriving back in Norway on 4 May (for further biographical details, see Endnote below).

Dahl's book (1926) and his diaries (see Archives) have enabled us to reconstruct their journey across northern Australia and align the biological specimens they collected more accurately to specific locations, many of which were previously allotted a very generalised location (e.g., Daly River, Mary River, Roebuck Bay) or incorrectly assigned (e.g., Derby, Fitzroy River). Based on Dahl's specimen collection numbers, commencing from Port Darwin (NT) on 09.06.1894 (399) to Roebuck Bay (WA) and ending on 20.02.1896 (1683), he collected 1284 biological specimens. We do not believe that we have located all the material they collected across northern Australia, although much is in the Natural History Museum, University of Oslo [NHMO (birds: 542+), (mammals: 181+)]. There are also some 327+ bird specimens in the AMNH (New York) - L.W. Rothschild Collection, which included the G.M. Mathews Collection. Robert Collett (1842-1913) was the first curator of zoology at the NHMO and was Director from 1886 until his death in 1913 [*cf.* Johannessen & Lifjeld (2022)], and Mathews (1942: 53) wrote that in about 1912, "Professor Collett allowed me to acquire those [Dahl northern Australia] skins that were new to my collection" [*cf.* Mathews (1925: 27), also Greenway (1973: 311) and LeCroy (2013: 98)]. Dahl collected bird specimens with firearms and to a lesser extent mammals, with the knowledge and assistance of the local indigenous population (Dahl 1926). He also collected reptiles and amphibians (189+), fishes (136+), molluscs and insects, most of which are housed in various NHMO collections, and many were probably collected with the assistance of the local indigenous communities. He also attempted to acquire aboriginal skeletons, while at Adelaide River. Many of the NHMO specimens lacked dates (see below) but utilising Dahl's collection numbers we were able to assign some of them to at least a year and in other cases, to a month. Also utilising locations (without collection numbers), we have been able to add at least the year, to specimens.

Many of Dahl's specimens have been utilised in the annals of science and new species and subspecies have been described, including by Boulenger (1895, 1896); Collett (1895, 1897, 1898); Greenway (1973, 1978); LeCroy (2003, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2017 - referencing Mathews' many publications within); Parnaby (2009); Parnaby *et al.* (2017); Pethon (1969); Rendahl (1922); Rothschild (1903, 1904); Sars (1896a, 1896b); Thomas (1909, 1915, 1926); Timms (2016); and Warren (1966). His specimens have also been used in mapping the distribution of bird species in the Top End of Western Australia and Northern Territory (Storr 1967, 1980).

This is not a taxonomic publication, and we have not discussed any taxonomic implications or proposed changes: our aim is to correct specimen data (date and location), enhancing the detail of collection locations. Unfortunately, we cannot with any surety assign a species name to bandicoot specimens Dahl collected. At that time, both the Northern Brown Bandicoot (*Isodon macrourus*) and Golden Bandicoot (*I. auratus*) - the latter now extinct across much of its range - were present in both the Top End of the Northern Territory and northwest Western Australia. DNA analysis or dental morphology may be used to identify this material accurately to species (Travouillon (2022)). Otherwise, to the best of our ability, we have listed the specimens under their current common/scientific names. Common names for birds are widely standardised and easily matched with the appropriate scientific names - thus, as in Mason & Scambler (2024), we have used only common names for bird specimens, following the International Ornithologists' Union World Bird List Version 15.1 (<https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/bow/>). For all other taxa, naming is complex and scientific names are needed to align with common names: we follow the Australian Faunal Directory (<https://biodiversity.org.au/afd/home>). Note, that online databases and collection managers do not necessarily follow those protocols. To determine the placement of collection localities, we gleaned information from Dahl's diaries and other historical sources, and overlaid them on maps prepared in Google Earth Pro. This book is presented in two Sections: (A), Northern Territory environs, NT (June 1894 - September 1895); and (B), Broome environs, WA (September 1895 - February 1896) - the relevant references are repeated at the head of each Section.

Sources:

Manuscript sources are listed in Archives (below). Dahl compiled a specimen diary (NHMO-Z-V-X-0042), with a numbered list of specimens with dates and (incomplete) data on species, sex and age classes of the specimens. He also composed a series of expedition diaries with a day-to-day narrative of conditions, events and collections. Entries in the early expedition diaries have been transcribed and translated by Lars Erik Johannessen, and further accounts based on Dahl's diaries can be found in his (1926) book. We have searched the NHMO collection databases and cross referenced them with Dahl's specimen diary (NHMO-Z-V-X-0042), and extracted information from the expedition diaries to enhance the specimen locations and dates. Errors found during this process (eg. dates, sex, age and some misidentifications) have been corrected (Lars Erik Johannessen, NHMO (Norway)). Further details about the NHMO specimens, including photographs of some, can be found via <https://www.gbif.org/>.

However, attributing accurate dates to Dahl's specimens faced a number of challenges. There are discrepancies between the actual collection dates in Dahl's expedition (narrative) diaries, compared with those in his specimen diary, which he noted (with specimen number) on his original specimen labels. Based on his numbering system of the specimens, label dates vary from 0-7 days later than those in his narrative accounts. We presume that the latter give the real dates of collection, while the date in the specimen diary and on his original labels (used in databases) is probably the date when Dahl labelled and catalogued the specimens. However, unfortunately, many specimens in the NHMO (Norway) are missing Dahl's original labels and over time these were replaced with new labels, lacking the specimen number. (Fortunately, this was not the case with specimens in the AMNH (New York) and Kristin E. Schaumburg has kindly photographed the labels with Dahl's corresponding specimen numbers). Thus, for consistency, we have followed the collection dates in Dahl's specimen diary and original labels, and where we could align the actual specimens with his specimen diary, we have included the specimen registration numbers in the diary accounts in brackets. Additional specimen numbers that were worked out by the process of elimination are in bold (eg, NHMO (BI-59713/1-P): (coll. no. = **561**) – Barking Owl [F]). Dahl appears to have been a little disorganised when he first arrived at Port Darwin and in that chapter, we have been unable to consistently align many of the specimens with the numbers in his specimen diary. As Dahl's expedition progressed on to the Daly River, we have been far more successful in confidently aligning most of his bird and mammal specimens with numbers in the specimen diary. With Dahl's fish, reptile, amphibian and micro-organism specimens - although original field labels may be contained within some of the specimen jars - time did not permit them to be accessed.

Interestingly, Australian zoologist William David Lindsay Ride (1926-2011) visited NHMO (Norway) in July 1965 and January 1966 (Ride n.d.), preparatory to writing his (1970) book on Australian mammals. In Oslo he "... examined all we could hunt up of Dahl's material [and] got photocopies of many of Dahl's original notes" (Barth 1970). Ride began drafting a catalogue of Dahl's Australian mammal specimens, to match the specimen information with details in the early published literature (see

references by Collett, Dahl and Thomas below). This was never completed, but his unpublished manuscript (Ride n.d.) provided valuable additional information on some specimens.

We may have understated the number of Dahl's specimens that were utilised as types. For example, in describing the Short-eared Rock-wallaby *Petrogale brachyotis signata* Thomas (1926: 629-630) chose one of Dahl's Mary River specimens as the holotype and cited an additional six specimens - "Hab. Northern Territory in the district drained by the South Alligator River, the Mary River, and the Daly River. Type from the Mary River. Type. Old female B.M. no.97.4.12.1. original number 1225. Collected 14th May 1895, by Dr. Knut Dahl. Received in exchange from the Oslo Museum. Six specimens, representing all the above localities". Thomas' wording is ambiguous: the type specimen appears to be the only exchange of this species received by NMHUK (London) from NHMO (Norway), and he does not give any further details of the six paratypes. Thomas also had access to specimens collected in the Northern Territory in 1902-1903 by J.T. Tunney (Rothschild collection), but Tunney did not visit the Daly River area and more than likely, the six paratypes included some of Dahl's specimens. Without further details we are unable to allocate any of Dahl's six additional specimens from the above localities as paratypes.

We have not listed errors on the Atlas of Living Australia or the (original) VertNet databases, as it would congest the specimen data presented, and we have not investigated the new VertNet database, which was launched just before this publication was completed. In many cases, G.M. Mathews' name has been incorrectly added as collector on Dahl's specimens on the AMNH (New York) online database - we have indicated this error against the specimens with an asterisk. Dahl occasionally misspelt scientific names (e.g. *Parameles* for *Perameles*) and we have corrected those without comment.

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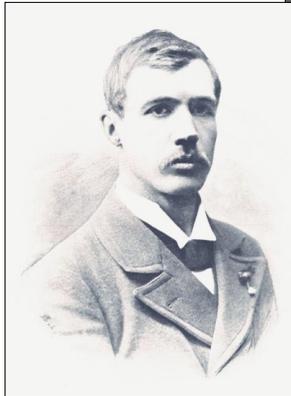
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Endnote:

Knut Dahl was born at Kyken in Ullensaker (Norway) on 28 October 1871 and grew up at Hakadal in Akershus (Norway). In his youth he became an excellent shot and a skilled angler. In 1889 he entered the University of Oslo (Norway) where he studied zoology. After his Australian expedition, Dahl was appointed as a research fellow at the Royal Norwegian Society of Science and Letters, and married Marie Astrup (1874-1947) in 1898. Although outside our discussion, Dahl also collected a series of zoological specimens in South Africa before coming to Australia, and after he returned to Norway, between 1898-1905. He published his accounts of both his African and Australian expeditions and died in Oslo (Norway) on 11 June 1951. We know little about Dahl's taxidermist, Ingel Olsen Holm, other than that he was born in 1871 in Jevnaker, Hadeland (Norway) and was a childhood friend of Dahl. Holm married Oline Andersen at Nittedal, Akershus (Norway) on 9 January 1899, and in 1900 was residing in Kristiania, Oslo; the census lists his occupation as cartman worker (wagon man).

Zoological Museum, University of Oslo, Norway



The Zoological Museum, University of Oslo, a few years after opening in 1910. NHMO still resides there today.

Robert Collett, Director of the Museum, was the driving force behind the new Museum and Dahl's expedition.

Portraits - Top: left, Robert Collett. Bottom: left, Knut Dahl; right, Ingel Holm

Museum: photographer unknown, Mittet & Co. A/S: public domain, courtesy National Library of Norway

Robert Collett: Oil on canvas, P. N. Arbo, 1888. Photograph by Rune Aakvik, Oslo Museum (from the art collection of the University of Oslo: public domain)

Sketches of Dahl and Holm from Dahl (1898), artist unknown (public domain)